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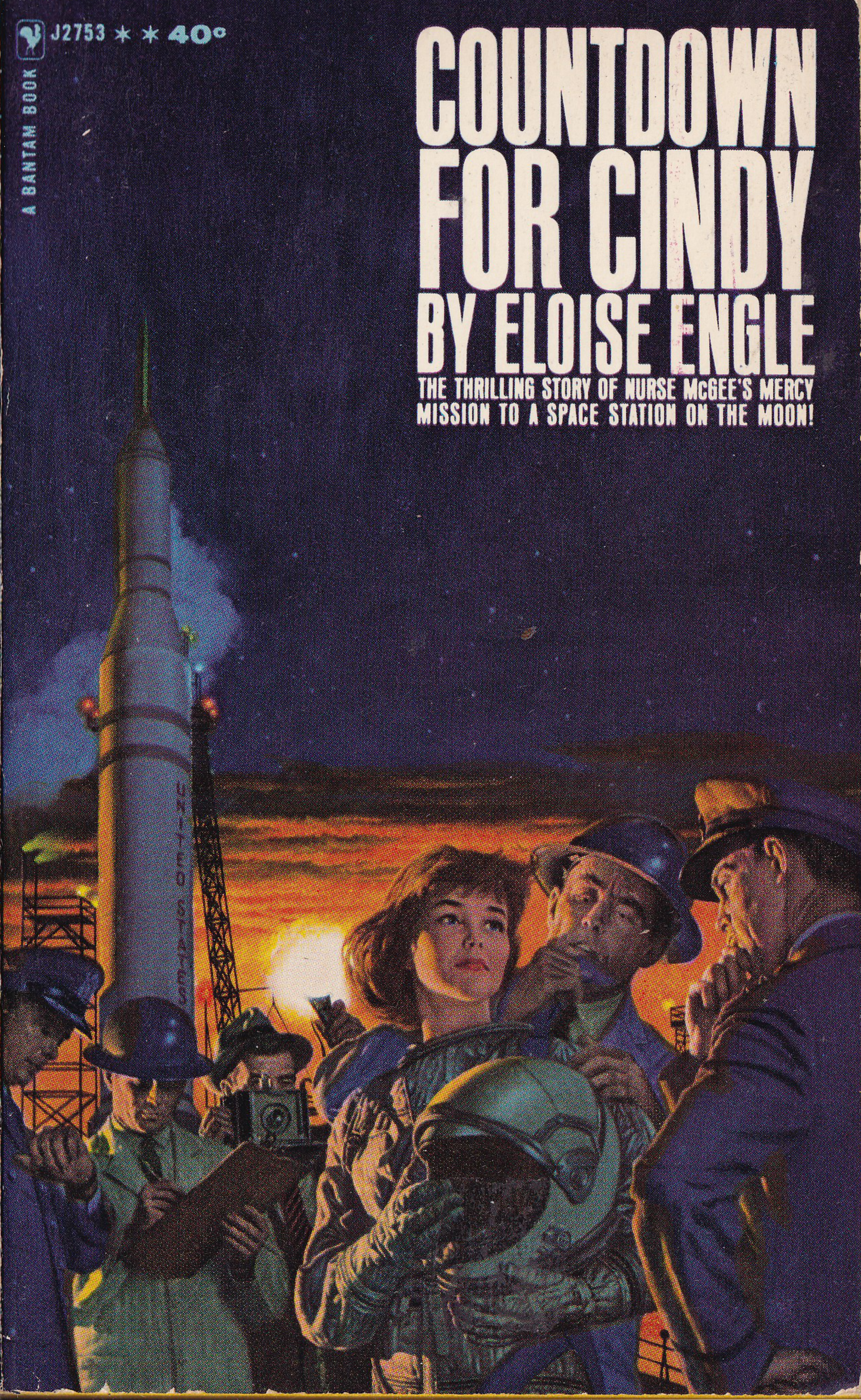
# COUNTDOWN FOR CINDY

BY ELOISE ENGLE

THE THRILLING STORY OF NURSE McGEE'S MERCY MISSION TO A SPACE STATION ON THE MOON!



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UNITED STATES

# OUT OF THIS WORLD

At Moon Station, Cindy had said good night to the men and was on her way to bed when Turk Hunter, famed daredevil astronaut, stopped her. His hand touched her arm.

"There's a beautiful earth out tonight. . . . Why don't you slip into something lovely, and we'll have an earthlight stroll?"

Cindy tried to back away. She was determined to play it cool. Just because they were literally out of this world together was no reason Turk Hunter should add her name to his list of swooning girls, who had been betrayed by his easy charm.

But as she looked into his laughing eyes, she realized it was going to be hard, very hard, to resist this man.

# COUNTDOWN FOR CINDY

BY ELOISE ENGLE

YOUR ASSURANCE OF QUALITY · BANTAM BOOKS · NEW YORK

*This low-priced Bantam Book*
*has been completely reset in a type face*
*designed for easy reading, and was printed*
*from new plates. It contains the complete*
*text of the original hard-cover edition.*
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*For*

*Cindy Nichols*

# *Foreword*

At no time in history has the field of nursing offered such challenges to girls as it does today. The space age is here and we nurses can contribute our special skills in a wide variety of space jobs.

Although nurses do not push the buttons that send missiles soaring into space, it is the missile nurse who waits out the long countdowns, ready to give specialized aid to workers who may be injured. Our sister nurses prepare the astronaut's low residue diet before he climbs into his spacecraft, while others work in laboratories in highly technical research projects.

Lt. Shirley Sineath and I consider ourselves the luckiest nurses alive because it is our job to work directly with the astronauts. It is a close, friendly relationship that I will always treasure.

It is hard to describe my feelings as Al Shepard, Gus Grissom, John Glenn, and Scott Carpenter lay strapped in their contour couches aboard the Mercury capsules, ready to blast off. As their nurse, I know them well and, although I did not travel with them on their historic flights, I did so in spirit. My prayers were with them every minute.

It is conceivable that an aerospace nurse of the future, such as Cindy, could go into space, even to the moon, to bring comfort and medical care to those in need. When that day comes, I hope I am around for her countdown.

Dee

DOLORES O'HARA, Lieutenant
Nurse for the Mercury Astronauts
Cape Canaveral, Florida

# *Introduction*

"In this new and exciting space age . . . there *is* space for women—a place in space for young people like yourselves who will prepare themselves for this greatest of all challenges.

"But it is not an easy job—and one must be thoroughly educated, trained and prepared for this scientifically exacting work. The greatest need will be for scientists, engineers, mathematicians, doctors and technicians—and women will work beside men as partners with mutual respect . . ."

These are the words of Miss Jerrie Cobb, American aviatrix, holder of many speed and altitude records, as she opened the first Women's Space Symposium in February, 1962. Jerrie is one of twelve highly experienced women pilots who passed the same physical, laboratory, X-ray, and physical competence tests given the Mercury Astronauts. These determined women have shown the world that they are physically and emotionally capable of withstanding the stresses of space flight, once the need arises.

Today, the space age is in its infancy. Women are not likely to be traveling to the moon soon. Yet, even conservative scientists assure us women will go—eventually.

Who will those first women be? Pioneer settlers, scientists, or astronauts?

History tells us that one great group of women has consistently ventured to the far corners of the earth to bring comfort to mankind in time of trouble. Beginning with Florence Nightingale who cared for the sick and wounded during the Crimean War, nurses have served in peace and war wherever they were needed. In World War II, nurses slogged through the mud of North Africa, dodged bullets in Italy, and rode ambulances and hospital trains across the continent of Europe. In the Pacific, they dug trenches, bathed out of field helmets, and maintained tented field hospitals under the most primitive conditions. They took to the hospital ships and to the air, evacuating sick and wounded from the front lines. During the Korean conflict these brave women were responsible for saving the lives of thousands of United Nations troops.

Today, nurses are making vital contributions to America's space efforts. To mention a few, there are the dieticians who prepare the astronauts' food, and the missile nurses—specially trained—who care for the thousands of workers at Cape Canaveral. Two very special positions are held by Air Force Nurses, Lt. Dolores (Dee) O'Hara and Lt. Shirley Sineath. These women are the personal nurses to the astronauts.

In preparing *Countdown for Cindy,* I was fortunate in meeting and talking with many men and women closely connected with our country's space program. The help I received from all sources has been invaluable.

My thanks to Lt. Dolores (Dee) O'Hara, Lt. Shirley Sineath, and Colonel George Knauf USAF (MC) at Cape Canaveral. Chief Missile Nurse Mary Brodie offered many helpful suggestions. Jacqueline Cochran and Jerrie Cobb provided enthusiasm, encouragement and first-hand information based on their own record-breaking flights. Lt. Colonel Lucille Slattery, Chief of the Flight Nursing Branch, School of Aerospace Medicine at Brooks AFB, has my thanks for her interest and help.

I am deeply indebted to the scientists with whom I talked at the School of Aerospace Medicine, Brooks AFB, Texas: Dr. Daniel Arnon of the University of California for explaining his work in sub-cellular photosynthetic activity, Dr. Hans Clamann who told me about soilless gardening on the moon, and Dr. Hubertus Strughold for his ideas on environmental conditions on the moon.

Captain Byron Casteel (MC)USN assisted me with my "surgery" and my husband, Captain Paul R. Engle (MC)USN, contributed his medical knowledge as the book progressed. Captain Walton L. Jones (MC)USN was kind enough to read the completed manuscript and offer helpful comments.

I can never forget the kindness and patience of the officers and airmen at the Andrews Air Force Base Physiological Training Unit, who put me through the paces in their altitude chamber. Major Larry Kurtz, my T-33 pilot, bravely volunteered to show this novice what it was like to pull three G's and experience weightlessness.

Lastly, a note of thanks to my good friend and admired author, Erick Berry, whose words of wisdom continue to sustain me. I could not have dreamed of writing a space book for girls without the help of Major James F. Sunderman and the Air Force Book Program.

ELOISE ENGLE

Falls Church, Virginia
September, 1962

## 1

"The news, as it happens around the world."

The orbiting communication satellite bounced the sound waves back and forth to millions of anxious listeners.

"FLASH!!! Word has just been received from Cape Doneval that the three injured moon scientists will be returned to mother earth in time for Christmas. Yes, it will be turkey, dressing, and mincemeat pie for the men who nearly became mincemeat themselves, after a fall from a lunar cliff plunged them hundreds of feet into a rocky crevasse.

"At this very moment, ladies and gentlemen, preparations are being made to launch a mercy vehicle carrying Doctor Peter Lufkin and . . ." the voice broke off.

Men, women, and children all over the world stared at television screens that said, *"One moment, please."* Radio listeners heard the rustling of papers and muffled shouts in the background. Early morning commuters braked their cars and eased them to the side of the road. School teachers fiddled frantically with the knobs on their classroom television sets. The whole world seemed to hold its breath in tense anticipation.

"This is incredible, but true," the announcer cried out excitedly. "Dr. Lufkin is taking his assistant, Lieutenant Cindy McGee. And, ladies and gentlemen, Lieutenant McGee happens to be a ninety-five pound *female* Aerospace Force Nurse."

There was another pause. Finally the announcer called out cheerily. "I have it on good authority that the world's first moon nurse is a faithful user of Perma-Perf, our sponsor's own all-purpose galactic scent, that out-of-this-world perfume . . ."

Cindy McGee switched off the television set in her room at the nurses' quarters at Adams Aerospace Force Base. She was glad her room-mate, Ellie Dapovitch, was still on duty in the dependents' ward. There were times when a person needed to be alone, and this was one of them. She clutched the official orders in her hand and reread them. Yes, it was really true. That silly announcer, hamming up the news of the most awesome crisis of her life was absolutely right for a change. She smiled to herself. He was accurate, even to the commercial tidbit about her choice of perfume.

She glanced at her tiny watch and saw the precious seconds ticking away. Her knees shook and her throat constricted with the sudden silence. Any moment now her room would be buzzing with activity. Her nurse friends would be wishing her well, patting her on the back, telling her how proud they were that women were at last being given the chance to show the stuff of which they were made.

But what was she made of? She turned on her mental TV as thoughts swirled in her brain. Her dad used to say "sugar and spice and everything nice." That was before she veered away from her regular nurses' training and fell, pitch over yaw, for aerospace medicine. When she donned the uniform of the Aerospace Force Nurse Corps, he shook his head and wondered aloud why he "ever raised her up." She couldn't blame him for those thoughts. The world was full of people who still wondered why anyone in his right mind would go galavanting around the universe when there was so much yet to be done on earth. They could not see the relationship between space research and their own comfortable lives here on planet earth. Those anti-space people did not realize how much pain, ugliness, hunger, and hardship had been conquered by the space scientists and explorers. Someday, she hoped and prayed, her father would understand and be proud of what she had chosen to do with her life.

She thrust out her chin stubbornly as a thought occurred to her. Golly, it was dad's fault in a way that she was in her present predicament! If he, in the typical doctor's naïveté about finances, hadn't allowed some sharp-talking confidence man to sell him that worthless real estate on Mars, he would not have been bankrupt, in which case Cindy would not have seized the opportunity to draw extra hazardous duty pay by signing up for space passenger training to help him out of his financial snarls. Little did she know that she and the other six nurses around the country who had passed the tests would be anything but experimental "backups." Of course, several women astronauts had taken similar tests, but they were experienced test pilots, not nurses. Those women loved to fly; they were daredevils; several of them held engineering degrees . . . flying was their life work. Not so with Cindy.

Even as she accepted her space passport, she admitted secretly that she was basically afraid of heights, of speed, and of the unknown.

She shook her head impatiently. Heavens, what an attitude to have at a time like this!

She walked slowly to the window and fixed her attention on the poinciana tree in full bloom on the lawn outside. "Buck up old girl," she whispered angrily. "You with your big talk and fine ideas about exploring the unknown! You with the encouraging word and pat on the back for a scared astronaut patient . . . you with the psychologically clever answer for the nervous dependents of jet pilots. You tell them 'no sweat.' All right. Now tell that to yourself!"

"Cindy! Cindy!" Ellie rushed into the room, her full round cheeks flushed with excitement, her hands waving frantically. "I just heard over TV. Why didn't you tell me?" Her voice rose to a high squeak.

"I just heard myself," Cindy told her. "It's an emergency situation and . . ."

"And *you're* the one who was chosen! Oh, Cindy, aren't you *thrilled?*"

Cindy bit her lower lip to keep it from trembling. "Numb would be a better word." She ran a hand through her short red hair. "It's pretty SCARY, you have to admit. About my only qualification of value is my size, and that includes my infinitesimal supply of nerve."

Ellie's blue eyes widened. "You've got tons of nerve, dearie," she consoled. "Remember, you passed all those tests in the torture chambers. You are psychologically and physically superior to us other mortals. You are one of our very best nurses. Besides all that, you're cute."

"Honestly, Ellie!" Cindy slumped her shoulder impatiently. "The moon is not exactly the boardwalk at Atlantic City. This trip is for real . . . for keeps. If I goof on anything, well, I won't be around for a refresher course."

"Oh fiddle-dee-dee. You'll be tremendous and just darling all the way." Ellie sighed admiringly. The gravity of the situation just wasn't sinking in. "Just think, you are *my* roommate. May I have your autograph?"

"Stop it," Cindy laughed, suddenly glad that Ellie had broken her solitude. "If you start razzing me, I'll die."

Ellie plopped herself down on the twin bed on her side of the room and kicked off her shoes. "I still say you're plenty lucky." She toyed with the rubber tipped Indian arrow in her lap. "Space travel couldn't be more hazardous than pediatrics." She waved the feathered missile at her friend. "You know where this thing hit me don't you?"

Cindy laughed again. "I can imagine. I hope you applied for a purple heart."

"Certainly." Ellie's face grew wistful. "I wish I could go with you, Cindy. Just to see Waldo again . . . ah me!" She put her hands on her ample hips and sighed. "You will be stopping at the Space Station, won't you?"

Cindy shook her head. "Not this trip. We're fitted out for a straight shot both ways. You know, hurry, hurry . . ." She looked at her friend. "Would you really want to go if you had the chance?"

Ellie wiggled her tired toes, then studied them for a moment. "Welllll," she evaded, "if I couldn't see Waldo, I suppose I would just as soon let you be the first one of us to go up there." She slipped her bare feet into her scuffs, then stood up with some effort. "But why even ask? You know perfectly well they'd never let fat me in their precious spaceships."

"You're not fat," Cindy said guardedly. "One or two less chocolate sundaes a day and you'd weigh in just fine."

"Eek. You trying to kill me or something?" Ellie surveyed her image in the full-length mirror, tried with effort to hold in her stomach, then gave up in despair. "The way I look at it, Waldo is far away and he'll never know. Soon as I hear he's coming back for earth duty again, I'll go on a water diet."

"And probably kill yourself in the process," Cindy pointed out. She glanced at her watch again and gasped. "What are we standing here talking for? I've got to hurry." Suddenly panic swept through her again. "Oh Ellie, I'll never make it. What'll I do?"

The chubby blond nurse snapped her fingers sternly and pointed towards the shower room. "You go get clean and remember to brush your teeth. As we all know after we've had a couple of whiffs of returning astronauts, you can't brush between planets or bathe either. Better wash your hair, too. Lucky you with naturally curly hair." She whirled around and took down Cindy's traveling bag from the closet shelf. "I'll pack for you."

Cindy hugged her friend. One of the greatest things about the Aerospace Force Nurse Corps was the people. The *esprit de corps*, the loyalty, the pride, and concern they felt for one another. "I'll miss you so much." Her eyes misted suddenly. "You're the best room-mate I've ever had . . . and the best friend, too. Oh, if only you could get a transfer to Cape Doneval so you could be there for my countdown. And I'd love to see you if . . . I mean, when I return."

She turned quickly and forced her thoughts back to a proper attitude. "Oh say, how about borrowing your Cenchuri-Soap?" She mimicked the news announcer's commercial, "for those who can't bathe between centuries. Ladies, you don't want your space suits to go into orbit by themselves. . . ."

Now as the hot water splashed over her short hair and bare shoulders she began to feel alive again. The shocked numbness brought on by the surprise orders was replaced by the tingling sensation of sweet scented foamy soap and shampoo. In a few moments she was out of the shower, rubbing down with a gigantic white towel. She wrapped it around her body, sarong fashion, brushed her teeth and hurried back to her room to dress.

At the doorway, she stopped dead still. There, sprawled comfortably in the easy chair, was the one person she didn't want to see at a time like this. The dark, chrysanthemum-cut hair, the turned-up nose, the almond-shaped eyes that belied the girl's true personality. Rosalind Winters!

She forced a nonchalant smile. "Hi, Rosalind. I thought you were way across country."

"Oh, I was, but you know it only takes a few minutes to get home. And I use the term home loosely." Then Rosalind added smoothly and meaningfully, "Especially when I am at the controls of my souped-up T-bird jet." She leaned back in the cushions and stretched a tanned, shorts-clad leg high in the air, pointing the bare toes ballet fashion. "Yes, I had to be with little Cindy for her very first countdown. General Craig has exercised his usual fine judgement by assigning me the task of flying Cindy to the Cape. Of course, I pointed out that women must stick together at a time like this . . ."

"I'll bet!" Ellie snapped, as she handed Cindy the uniform slacks and blouse she would wear temporarily. "Put these on honey." She turned her back on Rosalind. "I've packed disposable undies, a disposable uniform in case you need one for a staff party . . ." She glanced over her shoulder at Rosalind. "If you want to help, you can round up a copy of

*Books Unlimited.*" This thirty-five page book of ultrafilm would be invaluable to Cindy since it contained printings of all the books that had ever been written. All she would need to read it was her ultrascope. The beam would make details clear that ordinary old-fashioned microscopes could not make visible.

"Oh, by all means Cindy must have reference material," Rosalind commented sweetly, not budging an inch from her comfortable position. She examined her long painted fingernails and admired her slender hands. "She'll be under such stress, poor dear. Wouldn't it be *dreadful* if she *forgot* what to do? As a matter of fact, she could *panic* for all we know. Seems to me I remember a little difficulty in the sensory deprivation chamber. What was it you saw? Oh yes, Spanish soldiers marching across the dials of your control panel."

"No," said Cindy with effort. "They were hippopotami."

Rosalind beamed. "I do hope you won't have such hallucinations in space. You won't be able to signal and get out up there . . ."

Ellie was zipping up Cindy's slacks; by now the young redhead was far too shaky to do the job herself. "You know, Rosalind," Ellie purred, "I heard of a delightful cumulus buildup down south someplace. Why don't you just take your jet up there and crawl into the clouds for a while?"

Rosalind swung her legs and leaped to the floor. In a second, she was before the mirror examining the dark eye makeup, the planet-pastel lipstick, and the jet black hair. "I couldn't possibly do *that,* my dear girls, because the general has named me as Cindy's backup. I weigh only a hundred and ten pounds and, of course, I've taken several first aid courses." She pressed her lips together and raised her eyebrows, admiring the reflection she saw. "Cindy would be wise to listen to a few thoughts I have to impart."

"Like what?" Ellie demanded. "Like how they should have chosen you instead of Cindy, because you are a qualified test pilot with all those speed and altitude records?" She shook her head. "Too bad you only managed to wangle yourself into second choice position."

Rosalind sighed with boredom. "Really butterball, you are quite testy this morning. Mind if I talk to Cindy?"

"Yes, I mind. She's got enough to think about without . . ." Ellie turned away but Cindy held her arm.

"L-let her have her say. She's had a lot more experience in things like this than I've had." Cindy ran a comb through her hair and pretended only to half listen. After all Rosalind was, well, the glamor girl of the whole outfit. Speed demon . . . zipping through the sky, vying with the speed of light . . . volunteering herself time after time in tolerance "torture chambers" so that women would be accepted for space travel when the need for them arose. Certainly she was instrumental in getting women on flying status for ferrying aircraft to far-flung bases, and more recently for test piloting. "You are a woman and a part of our group," Cindy said slowly. "I'd appreciate any advice you care to give me."

"That's my girl," Rosalind smiled cannily. The mental wheels were beginning to turn. "First of all, you've got to know how to handle men. You know, those funny creatures that grow whiskers and telephone you all the time, pleading for dance and dinner dates?" She helped herself to Cindy's Perma-Perf atomizer. *"Ugh!"* She turned up her pretty nose. "I'm a Chanel No. 5 girl myself. Where was I? Oh, yes, *men.*"

"What about them?" Ellie's complexion was a sort of temper thermometer. At the moment, it was beet red.

"Well, you've got to realize that men think women are helpless little frills, that they are basically opposed to our doing anything but cook, sew, wash their socks, and tend their babies."

"Waldo's not like that," Ellie broke in defensively. "He's proud of the work I do in nursing."

Rosalind smiled condescendingly. "I was referring to *men.* Now, as I was saying, the only way to get ahead in a man's world is to be tough . . . beat them at their own game . . . show them you're not afraid of anything." She moved so that she could get a better view of Cindy's face. "You're not *afraid?*"

Ellie wedged herself in between the two women. "Cindy pleads the Fifth Amendment."

Rosalind smoothed her hands over her slender hips and admired her reflection in the mirror again. "Well girls, I must be running along. If you change your mind about going, Cindy, you can just tell everyone that Rosalind Winters is ready, willing, and *able.*" The last word was strongly emphasized. "Just buzz me at the club when you're all set for takeoff."

After she was gone, the two nurses did their best to forget the irritating visitor. There were still last-minute items to pack and final preparations to be made. "You've had all your immunization shots?"

Cindy nodded. "And my health record, blood type, and so on are tattooed on the soles of my feet. Thank goodness, you can't see it without infra red." She turned to Ellie. "If . . . if anything happens . . . you know, if something should go wrong, will you see about dad?"

"Sure, honey. Why, he's just like my own father. You know that. And since his heart trouble began, I've felt closer to him than ever . . ." Ellie cleared her throat nervously. Her surface calmness was beginning to crack, but she was determined to hide her qualms from her friend. "Come on, I'll drive you over to the field."

Cindy started for the door, then paused and turned. "Nothing will ever be quite the same after today, will it?" Her eyes flicked over the familiar room that had been home to her for so many months. It was very plain, just like a dozen others, except for the new floral drapes she and Ellie had splurged on, and the ceramic figurines lined up on the bookshelves. On the wall hung a framed copy of the Flight Nurses' Creed and now the words dug in at her with a strange new force:

> I have taken a nurse's oath, reverent in man's mind because of the spirit and work of its creator, Florence Nightingale. She, I remember, was called "the lady with the lamp."
>
> It is now my privilege to lift this lamp of hope and faith and courage in my profession to heights not known by her in her time. Together with the help of flight surgeons and surgical technicians, I can set the very skies ablaze with life and promise for the sick, injured, and wounded who are my sacred charges.

She looked back at Ellie. "That's quite a promise to live up to," she said slowly. "I'm glad I read it just now."

"I know what you mean," the blond nurse agreed. "I read it myself sometimes when I get that what-am-I-doing-here kind of feeling. It reminds you that you're not alone; that there were thousands of flight nurses before us, blazing the skies with life and promise. They went wherever they were needed in peace or war."

Ellie picked up Cindy's bag and the two girls started down the hall. Cindy was silent as she climbed into Ellie's rattletrap sports car. Finally she said, "I wonder what Florence Nightingale would say if she could see me now."

Ellie gunned the motor and raced down the roadway. "She'd probably say, "Don't forget your bucket and mop to clean up that dirty old moon!' "

## 2

Funny how you can be with fellow workers every day and not really see some of them at all. Others are like jets; you don't hear them until they are past, especially if you are as terribly busy as Cindy usually was. An Airman First, locally known as Brer Rabbit, was one of them, and now as Cindy clomped into the equipment room to get fitted out for her first jet flight, she was sharply aware of how much she would miss this comical looking aeromedical technician in the trials ahead. It was he who had helped her through so many of the grueling tests by just being there to keep an eye on her and give her personal tips on how to endure the stresses.

"Good morning, Brer," she called cheerily.

"Who asked you for a weather report?" He rubbed his eyes, yawned and said, "Oops, excuse me, Cindy. Thought you were the CO." He handed her a white crash helmet and oxygen mask from the supply bin. For the first time, Cindy realized how he came by such a strange nickname. With his bloodshot eyes and rounded nose, its postnasal drip caused by his altitude chamber work, he did indeed resemble a moth-eaten rabbit.

"You look kind of beat today," she said sympathetically. "I'll bet you've been volunteering as a guinea pig again." She slipped the helmet on to check the fit.

"Yes, ma'am. I just broke my own record in the disorientation chamber. You know, the ball-shaped chamber that sits on a cup and gets spun around by compressed air shooting up from the bottom? As the docs say, it can elicit gross physiological changes."

"I should think so," she commented.

"Yeah. And they said I checked out almost as fine as the chimpanzees." He sniffed his nasal inhaler once or twice.

"Come now, Brer," Cindy said seriously, "you are being far too modest. Why, if it weren't for you fellows risking your health, even your lives sometimes, aerospace medicine wouldn't have progressed as far as it has now. Your work has been truly heroic."

He probed a bony finger under the soft spongy doughnuts that would protect her ears inside the helmet. "You're about to lose an old friend with that kind of talk." He twitched his nose and wiggled his ears to indicate his secret pleasure at Cindy's kind words. "Helmet's too loose. I'll get you a smaller one." He reached into the cubbyhole marked pinheads. "Now you're in business."

She rolled up the pants legs of her dark green, nylon coverall-type flight suit. Then she strapped on her Mae West life preserver. Next came the parachute with straps to be adjusted to her tiny size. "Well, Brer," she looked at him gratefully, "I appreciate your help in the physiological and psychological training tests. I never would have made it if it weren't for your voice of experience."

"Oh, sure you would have." Then he added meaningfully, "Eventually."

She swung her equipment over her shoulder, and they walked down the hallway. By now, Cindy had made up her mind to take one thing at a time and try as best she could to keep an objective outlook. First would come the jet ride. If she survived that, the sky would literally be the limit. It seemed everyone they passed in the hall wanted to stop and chat, but Cindy was concentrating on Brer's final briefing.

"All that antique equipment may seem like a nuisance," he said. "Especially the oxygen mask. Your cockpit is pressurized so you won't have to go on oxygen unless . . ."

"Unless we spring a leak and lose pressure?"

"Roger. That's why we train you to know what's going on." He cleared his throat. "Just remember that at sea level, air weighs 14.7 pounds per square inch but at 34,000 feet, the pressure is only 3.62 psi. At 63,000 feet, the boiling point of blood, there's only about a pound of pressure left so that at high altitude the problem is *lowered* atmospheric pressure. Get it?"

Cindy nodded. "Oh, sure."

"Dames!" he shook his head. "Look. Up there, the pressure isn't great enough to force oxygen into the thousands of air sacs in your lungs, the alveoli, which in turn pass the oxygen into the bloodstream."

"Roger," she said, hoping he would continue the briefing.

"And if you don't get enough oxygen into your bloodstream, you get hypoxia, or oxygen starvation, and then you're not much good for anything."

"You get dizzy, euphoric, nauseated, fuzzy vision and pretty soon you pass out," she added, recalling her session in the altitude chamber. They'd gone up to 35,000 feet and taken off their oxygen masks to test themselves for their own individual signs of hypoxia. She had noticed her fingernails turning blue and suddenly two plus two equalled nine on the pad on which she was working simple arithmetic problems.

"Deprive the brain of oxygen for four or five minutes and it's useless," Brer cautioned.

"Gotcha," she said as they swung open the door and started out to the flight line. "So, if we happen to be up at 42,000 feet or so, and the cockpit pressure gets flukey, I remember to turn my regulator to the safety setting and pressure breathe 100 percent oxygen." She swallowed hard as she remembered the horribly uncomfortable sensation of air being pushed into her face. She'd had to reverse her whole breathing system by accepting a little bit of air, mentally counting one, two, three, then forcibly exhaling. "And I'll watch my cat's-eye blinker that measures my rate of breathing because if I breathe too fast, I'll hyperventilate, lose too much carbon dioxide too fast, and pass out."

"Good girl," beamed Brer. "You remembered! Now, when you're flying, keep your eyes straight ahead. If you turn your head around every which way, your gyros (semi-circular canals) get so tumbled you lose your orientation."

"You mean I'll get dizzy?"

"Right." He sniffed his inhaler again.

"And what about G forces?" she asked numbly.

"Holy smokes. You forget that already?" He stopped and began clicking off the rules on his bony fingers. "Your normal weight at a sitting position is one G, or one gravity. In a jet rapid takeoff you'll get maybe a half G inertial weight so you'll be about half again as heavy as you are right now. You've hit a number of G's in the centrifuge gondola so you won't mind that."

"Har de har," she said dryly as she remembered the sensation of being pushed right through the couch as she whirled at the dizzy pace.

"And, of course, there is weightlessness, but if I remember correctly," he said with care, "you liked floating during the parabolic curve."

Cindy grinned. It had been kind of fun in an eerie sort of way to fly a loop-the-loop pattern in that big transport plane, and suddenly to find herself floating as light as a feather in the back cabin. However, it had lasted only a minute or so. She snapped her fingers, then held her stomach for a moment as she remembered that gas expands at high altitude. At 43,000 feet the gas inside her would be about nine times what it was on the ground. Thank goodness, she'd refused that last coke. She handed her wristwatch to Brer. "I may forget to give this to Ellie to keep for me. I don't want the crystal to pop out in case of trouble."

Brer stopped and turned to her. "Let's see you perform the Valsalva maneuver like a good girl. I don't want to hear of you developing an ear block or sinusitis because you couldn't clear the trapped air in your middle ear during descent."

Cindy obediently held her nose with thumb and forefinger as though she had just smelled something bad. Then she clamped her lips tight and blew. She felt the satisfactory crackle of her eardrums. "What's next, friend?"

"Wellllllll," he removed the red cap and scratched his head. "I guess you remember what to do in case of engine explosion or you run into a flock of birds that get sucked into the jet engine?"

"I . . . uh eject?"

"Good show," he beamed. "But you won't be in an escape capsule or an encapsulated seat that does your thinking for you and provides you with oxygen, warmth, and buoyancy in case you land in water, so you'll have to eject, peasant style, the old-fashioned way they did in the 1960's. Now," he paused and tightened his lips in thought, "before you do anything drastic, be sure and check your personal equipment. Check to see that your harness is tight, that the chin strap of your helmet is fastened, and your visor is in a down position to protect your eyes from wind blast. Then you bend down and remove a set of short metal pins that lock the seat to the floor of the plane. Draw your feet away from the rudder pedals and place them in a footrest at the base of the seat." He stopped himself. "But shoot, you know all this, Cindy."

She feigned nonchalance. "Of course, but please go on."

"Okay. When you've done all those things, then you wiggle back tightly against your seat, brace your head against the headrest, and pull in your chin. If you were the pilot, you'd pull the throttle back to off position. You've just got to remember to hug your elbows to your sides and lift up sharply on the armrests."

He cleared his throat and continued, watching her face as he explained, "When you pull up on the armrests, it explodes the canopy off the cockpit and sets the seat for triggering. Now, you squeeze the trigger on the right arm of the seat, and a gunpowder blast will blow you free of the cockpit, and a second blast will unlock your seat belt and shoulder straps which have held you to your seat. You'll fall out of your ejection seat and your chute will open automatically when you have reached the proper altitude."

He scratched his chin. "I've forgotten something. Oh yeah, don't forget to disconnect your oxygen hose from the plane's supply and connect it to the small bailout bottle strapped to your leg. You know how to pull the green apple to start it going?"

She nodded mutely.

"You'll have a period of free fall, but don't worry. You'll be all right." He rubbed his hands together, then yawned and stretched again. "You got it all now?"

"Yes, Brer. If anything happens to that plane, I'm going to die," she said.

## 3

She was suddenly conscious of noise, excitement, and people milling around everywhere. Of course, this was a big day for her, but she hadn't realized the entire command would be topsy-turvy for the send-off. Crewmen, pilots, doctors still in their white coats or blue uniforms, med techs in fatigues or best blues . . . yes, there were the nurses, too. At least twenty of them were lined up in their sparkling crisp hospital uniforms or flight suits. Ellie rushed over and threw her arms around Cindy. "Everybody's here to see you off," she said. "Isn't it exciting?"

"Yes," Cindy agreed as she eyed the milling mob. "But I almost wish they'd let me slip out of here quietly so I wouldn't be conscious of what I was getting into." She caught sight of blue uniforms, gold braid, and glistening brass instruments. "Golly, they've even got the Aerospace Force Band!"

Now, as she and Ellie hurried across the hot concrete pavement, the noise was almost deafening. "Off we go, into the wild blue yonder," the band played cheerily. Overhead, the thin scream of sonic thunder pierced the sky as a quartet of jets performed their aerial dances.

"Your escorts to the Cape," Ellie beamed and pointed to the snow-white furrows made by the skywriters as they spelled out C-I-N-D-Y. "Oh, oh, brace yourself. There's General Craig."

The crowd fanned out to form a "V" as Cindy approached. The band stopped playing and she was suddenly conscious of gentle coughs and the restless rustle of starched uniforms as she stubbed the toe of her heavy boot against an uneven spot in the paving. Somehow she managed an awkward salute. "Good afternoon, sir," she said in a small voice.

General Craig, known to have the mild and gentle disposition of a barracuda, returned the salute. "Lieutenant McGee." He bowed slightly in deference to her minikin size, then straightened to his full six foot two height. As the youngest general in Aerospace Force history, he seemed determined to appear as its oldest. Today, his face had an odd stiffness to it as if wax had been pumped in to harden under his skin. This was not a good sign.

"They tell me you are going on a little trip."

"Yes, sir," she fumbled with the zippered pocket of her flight suit and produced her papers. "I have my orders."

His mouth tightened to a hard line. "Of course, you know this does not have my approval, but there was no alternative. The heavier weight-carrying ships are assigned to deep space probes."

"I understand, sir."

He turned to the pressmen who were frantically taking notes. "I want to go on record as saying that women should not be sent into space. The age of chivalry is not dead. The rigors of space flight are too great for women."

Ellie whispered in Cindy's ear. "Don't pay any attention to that bachelor. He doesn't understand us women."

A newsman blurted out, "May I quote you as saying that this is still a man's world?"

"That is correct," the general nodded, then addressed the crowd. "I think we will see by the results of this flight that I was right in saying that, with the exception of a few highly trained test pilots, women should be permanently grounded on earth!"

The smiles of farewell faded as the general's prophetic words sank in. He had a reputation for never being wrong about anything.

"And you may further quote me as saying we would never have found ourselves in the position of having to assign an untrained female to a rugged space task if our budget had not been cut to smithereens. Fuel is expensive," he looked at Cindy, almost apologetically, "but so is human life."

Cindy shivered. "I . . . I appreciate your concern, sir. I can only say that I will do my utmost to be a credit to the corps."

The tenseness was broken by a husky cry of "Bravo! Bravo!" and a round of applause by Rosalind as she slithered into the limelight. "Well spoken, my dear."

In contrast to Cindy's baggy flight suit, Rosalind's civilian suit was beautifully tailored to her long sleek proportions. Today she had chosen a vibrant pink costume rather than the drab gray-green of the other pilots. She cozied up to the reporters, "I am available for pictures, of course, but you'll have to hurry. This farewell scene is throwing me off schedule."

She posed prettily, then turned to the general. "I can't tell you how *thrilled* I am to be named as Cindy's backup and I shall certainly tell my friends about your *exceptional* judgment."

General Craig glared at the implication that he was currying favor. "Young lady, you were selected because you are an excellent pilot and a graduate engineer. I tried to locate a female midget from the Andes with a Ph.D. but was unable to do so."

Rosalind bristled with anger as a quiet twitter of amusement rippled through the crowd. "I understand my assignment is to indoctrinate Cindy thoroughly in jets on this flight to the Cape."

General Craig narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "Within bounds of safety, yes. It is one thing to submit to tests under controlled conditions, and quite another to be subjected to the real thing. That is why I am specifying an older jet aircraft rather than a pressurized supersonic plane. Also," he glanced again at the newsmen, "we are having to make use of our antique planes in order to put all funds possible into research spacecraft."

"I am familiar with all types," Rosalind said, setting each word neatly on the heels of the last. "But as you know, a lot can happen between now and tomorrow morning when the countdown comes."

Ellie could contain herself no longer. Planting herself firmly in front of the tall brunette she said, "Cindy is going to make that flight and nobody's going to stop her." Red-faced, she shook a loyal finger, "Remember, there's nothing as good as a good nurse, and Cindy's the best in the business!"

Rosalind raised her eyebrows amusedly. "And nothing as helpless as a sick female . . . nurse or no nurse."

The anxious bandmaster started the music again before more feathers could fly, and General Craig, flanked by his aides and the troupe of newsmen, marched off the field. It was obvious this fracas was not to their liking.

Now, Cindy's nurse friends and lab technicians crowded around, wishing her well, telling her they were with her every mile of the way. Brer finally stepped forward, his face reddening as he solemnly said, "Lieutenant McGee, on behalf of the . . . the . . . well," he glanced around anxiously, "the gang around here, we want you to have this token of our esteem." He held out an object. He explained further, "It's not much, but we didn't have time to take up a collection or anything."

Cindy's eyes misted as she accepted the ridiculous toy space helmet. Attached to the top were springs à la Buck Rogers, with bits of artificial flowers on the ends. On top, someone had glued a funnel from the lab and across the front, neatly lettered in nailpolish, were the words, "Rose of No-Man's Land."

"Brer . . . everybody," Cindy choked up, "this is the most. Honestly, I'll always cherish it." She bit her lip and turned away. "Thanks so much. Goodbye, everybody."

"Goodbye Cindy . . . write when you find work!"

As she marched away to the jet that would take her to Cape Doneval, the band struck up once more, "For she's a jolly good fellow . . ." And still ringing in her ears was the out-of-date phrase, "happy landings."

## 4

Rosalind was already making her walk-around visual inspection of the red-nosed jet, probing with her gloved hand into various compartments and double-checking the extra fuel supply in the tip tanks that hung like melons on the sleek wings. Alongside, the yellow APU, Auxiliary Power Unit, putt-putted with the curiously incongruous noise of an antique car as it fed power through the white umbilical hose. Cindy felt her face burn with embarrassment as she saw the crew chief staring amusedly at the dancing cuffs of her trousers. How she wished she could blame a strong crosswind rather than the quivering knees.

Rosalind swung around at last, all business, and pointed to the yellow metal ladder for Cindy to climb into the rear cockpit. "Want a pill or anything?"

Cindy shook her head. "No thanks. I'll take this straight just as I will have to with my space flight."

The tall brunette raised an eyebrow, smiled, and eased on her white helmet. "As you wish. Oh, by the way, you'd better hook up your oxygen mask. I've had a teeny weeny bit of trouble with my pressurization and plan to get it fixed after this trip."

The explanation sounded phony . . . put-up. Rosalind went on, "*I* never have a bit of trouble. Will you?"

"Of course not." Cindy knew her answer was sheer bravado as she swung her leg over the side and eased herself into the rear cockpit. How she wished Brer were nearby to connect her oxygen supply and see that she was properly situated, strapped, and hooked; but, of course, she must learn to be independent about these things. By now, her head, beneath the heavy helmet, felt about as light as a block of cement.

Moments later Rosalind nimbly swung herself into the front cockpit. Around the sides of the instrument panel, Cindy could see the shiny white of the girl's helmet and bits of pink of her flight suit as she whipped out a lace handkerchief, gave her nose a good blow, and expertly attached her oxygen mask. She jerked her thumb, signaling the crew chief to move the APU. And now, thought Cindy, there are just the two of us.

Cindy was startled by Rosalind's clear voice coming through the radio installed inside her helmet. "We'll be on combat interphone all the time. In other words, we can talk back and forth between ourselves. Cozy, eh?"

Cindy's voice sounded unfamiliar and squeaky as she said, "Right."

There was more discussion between Rosalind and the Tower and then the engines started with a roar. Cindy stared at the maze of dancing dials in front of her, knowing she must not touch anything. Involuntarily she drew farther back into her seat as the stick between her knees moved. A warm breeze flicked across her perspiring forehead and she glanced to the left to see an old F1X6 bouncing along with the brilliant sun reflecting on its dome. White curtains had been pulled inside the canopy to blot out vision for blind-flying practice. Fascinated, she watched the plane's nose bob up and down, birdlike, as it raced down the runway.

A tingling sensation, beginning at her toes, slowly encircled her ankles and crept along her legs. Inside her bulky suit, she felt her heart thumping wildly as the sudden desperate urge to tear off the oxygen mask covering all but her eyes swept through her. Even her vision was beginning to fuzz. Good grief, they hadn't even begun to move, let alone get into the air. Frantically, she checked the cat's-eye blinker and discovered she was breathing far too fast. She was hyperventilating!

She crossed her fingers, said a silent prayer, and slowed her breathing rate as the radio voice came in again: "Peashooter 32. Taxi to 128 for runoff . . ."

"A-roger." To Cindy, Rosalind said, "All set?"

"Yes." She'd be darned if she'd admit otherwise.

Now as they taxied down the runway past the blackened ground area used for trimming jet engines, Cindy's thoughts whirled with renewed apprehension. But, she remembered from Brer's lectures, to be afraid is normal. She needn't be ashamed; this was not cowardice. Fear was nature's way of marshaling the body's energies, she repeated to herself as the Tower said calmly, "Take position and hold." The plane turned and hovered motionless for a moment.

Rosalind spoke. "Keep your hands clear of the canopy."

"Okay."

The clear clamshell canopy closed, and now Cindy could see the bright reflection of her pilot masterfully checking off her instruments, talking now to herself, now to Cindy. "Oil pressure okay . . . stabilized . . ." The outside engine noise had quieted to a dull roar when suddenly the entire plane vibrated as Rosalind ran the engines up to 90 percent power . . . clearance from the Tower . . . brakes released . . . and then they were streaking down the runway like a loose bullet. "We're on the roll," Rosalind said calmly amid whooshing sounds on either side of the enclosed cockpit. Moments later, they climbed into the clear blue sky, banked sharply in a turn, and headed south. Green fluff of trees, brown square patches of farm fields, cars, houses, rivers, and the bay became toy miniatures, then faded into a blurred or muted color.

"There's a bay bridge at 10 o'clock," Rosalind said. "Shall we dive under it?"

"No thanks," Cindy assumed she was kidding. "I think we'd better head right for the Cape. We've got a big date to keep. Remember?"

"Oh sure," Rosalind laughed into her radio. "But we can have a little fun on the way, can't we?"

Suddenly Cindy realized they were flying sideways, then upside down as they streaked through the sky. The general was right! Although she'd been subjected to all kinds of discomfort under controlled conditions, there was a vast difference between those tests and the real thing. She looked at the altimeter. At 45,000 feet you don't exactly step outside for a coffee break.

Oh no, she mentally moaned as waves of nausea swept through her. Her mouth watered alarmingly. I won't get sick . . . I won't black out . . . I won't, I won't! Still, she clutched the waxed paper burp bag as though her life depended on it and wondered desperately how one dealt with motion sickness at altitude, especially when wearing an oxygen mask.

Rosalind, up front, must be made of steel, she decided as the plane rolled yet again. Minutes that usually sped by in Cindy's life, now crawled or just plain stopped. The two-hour flight would be like two-hundred if and when she ever touched ground again. The terms, *pitch, yaw,* and *roll,* held quite a different meaning at altitude than they did in the physiological training textbooks.

"How you doing back there?" Rosalind asked brightly.

Cindy stifled her impulse to groan. "Fine," she said evenly. "You are an excellent pilot."

"Well, thanks, Ducky." Miraculously, Rosalind leveled the plane and flew in an even pattern for a while. Slowly, life returned to Cindy's tense limbs, and she relaxed for the first time to enjoy the lovely feeling of skimming high over the clouds faster than the speed of sound. Her mind flicked to an objective channel, and she allowed herself to think about where she was; what she was doing; and interestingly enough, what was happening to the plane. What strange and wonderful combinations of man's inventiveness devised the jet engines! Why, at this moment, they were gulping air like goldfish, compressing it, mixing it with kerosene, igniting the mixture, and blasting it out the rear.

She pondered further. No, it was not like goldfish but rather like a formation of squid propelling themselves through the undersea depths. Or like the inflated rubber balloons she had played with in childhood that had suddenly escaped her grasp and shot high into the air, pushed by the burst of escaping air.

In the distance, she saw tiny specks no larger than bits of dust, but even as she watched, they grew larger. Yes, there was her escort service. How skillfully they flew, as though dancing in the clouds. For that matter, she reluctantly admitted Rosalind was quite a pilot.

In the old days with piston-driven aircraft, Cindy had heard of the "Sacred Six" pilots, who concerned themselves with altimeter, air speed indicator, rate-of-climb dial, artificial horizon, compass and bank-turn indicator. And before that, all the pilots had to worry about (jokingly of course) was keeping their white scarves from getting tangled in the rudder. But Rosalind, flying the high-speed jet, must keep track of maybe two hundred switches, dials, knobs, flashing warning lights, buzzers, and horns. She must also scan the sky for other aircraft, send and receive radio messages, and make decisions on all the flood of information reaching her. It was quite a job, and for the hundredth time in the last hour and a half, Cindy congratulated herself on choosing nursing as a career, rather than jet piloting.

She was startled out of her musings as the Mach warning horn blared, and Rosalind accelerated, caught the wind, and went into a tight turn. Paralyzed with shock and surprise, Cindy stiffened her whole body as the G forces pushed her spine back, back, back into the seat. Her breath caught in her throat, her eyes felt as though they had been left suspended about a foot from her face. Good heavens! What was Rosalind doing? She should know that four G's in a sitting position could cause a blackout for both of them! And then, as fast as it began, it ended, leaving Cindy limp with shock.

"Wheeeee," Rosalind chuckled. "We just pulled 3 G's. Want to try for four?"

"No, no!" By now, Cindy was "grunt breathing," literally pushing her words out as she exhaled. She wished there were some way to send an S.O.S. to the faithful escort planes. Those pilots probably thought she was having the time of her life, playing around in the sky the same as they were. She longed for some high authority to shake a scolding finger at that woman up front; but she realized Rosalind would explain very sweetly that she was simply following the general's orders. She would say that she was thoroughly indoctrinating Cindy in high-speed jets but she would leave out the vengeance with which she was doing it.

She suddenly knew that Rosalind was just *waiting* for her to plead for mercy, in which case Cindy might as well kiss her moon mercy mission good-bye, along with her own prestige and that of the Aerospace Force Nurse Corps. What a triumph that would be for the feline female! Well, she wouldn't get away with it.

Cindy gritted her teeth in anger. "All right, Rosalind," she told herself fiercely. "Do your worst. But remember, you're in this plane, too."

As if on cue, the brunette up front flew into a parabolic curve, roller coasting over humps of nothingness, now weightless, now slamming against the opposing walls of sound and air. Blackness and nausea closed in on Cindy again, and even as she closed her eyes, she could see the instrument panel as clearly as if it had been tattooed on her eyelids. But wait! They were going into a dive, controlled, of course, but for a novice, terrifying.

I won't be frightened! I won't! Yet her body told her differently.

What was the trick that Brer had taught her to relieve the terrible pressure so that she would not black out? Don't just sit there, Cindy. Think! With shaking fingers, she switched off the interphone, then leaned back, opened her mouth, and screamed for all she was worth. Her ears popped and a wonderfully blessed relief engulfed her.

Rosalind's white helmet and pink-clad shoulders swam into focus as the plane leveled off, swooped up, and began circling in a corkscrew pattern. It was not possible . . . but yes, there beneath them lay the pancake flat of Cape Doneval!

She relaxed her tightened fists, and color returned to her white knuckles. Her breathing quieted, and she was able to hear the whooshing of wind, the slipstream noise, and the crackling voice of ground control. The black sea below became turquoise colored and she caught blurred glimpses of red gantry towers poking up out of the scrubby, sandy terrain of the Cape that curved into the sea.

Now there was the wail of the landing gear warning horn. Flaps were down, and Cindy was conscious of the terrific speed at which they were traveling as familiar objects—trucks, buildings, parked aircraft, and scrub pine along the strip—whizzed by in a blur. It was impossible to tell when the wheels touched ground because the landing was so smooth. Cindy smiled gratefully. That Rosalind was such a show-off! She knew everyone would be watching her bring the old plane down. Well, she did it, with perfection.

Before Cindy knew it, she was climbing down the yellow ladder, wanting desperately to kiss the earth, but deciding against so dramatic a display. And there was Dr. Lufkin to greet her and take her to a jolly, low residue lunch!

"Lunch?" Cindy croaked in horror. "Food?"

And then she fainted.

## 5

The tropical air at two o'clock in the morning was heavy and humid. The smell of hot damp underbrush and decaying vegetation hung like a disorderly cloak over the stark red gantries that protruded like so many unfinished skyscrapers from the Cape's flat surface. The earthy sounds of chirping crickets harmonizing with baritone bullfrogs reminded Cindy that she was still *here,* for the moment at least, and that man's scientific research and progress had left certain of nature's areas quite untouched. She curled her toes inside her flat heeled, uniform shoes, then absent-mindedly tapped one on the rough boards of the missile and rocket launch viewing stand. She smiled. It felt secure and good to be on something anchored firmly in the ground. Yes, even though earth was only a tiny planet revolving about a minor star in a galaxy of two hundred billion stars, this good old humble planet was still home.

What a curious age in which to be living, she pondered as a nearby whippoorwill sang its night song. Scholars were already labeling this era the Age of Transition, because of man's great explorations across the seas of space. Yet, for her, it was a time of strangeness, wonder, mystery, adventure, and magic. But her thinking was inconsistent. For instance when she looked upward, millions of twinkling stars somehow spelled romance, and the moon—well—it still rhymed with June. Scientists, of course, grumbled about the earth's blanketing atmosphere, that spoiled their view of the stars, and muttered that the moon was worthless for anything except as a jumping-off point for more interesting horizons. Cindy loved nature in an old-fashioned womanly way, yet she reminded herself she had not gotten up two hours early to contemplate it.

She focused her eyes on the distant Pad Eight where the X-DS4, experimental, deep probe spaceship stood in its tremendous gantry, fueled and fuming with impatience. White vapor billowed in swirling clouds and streamed upward beyond the floodlights. How strange to see this gantry so brilliantly, almost blindingly lighted, while the darkened unused gantries appeared as forlorn, lonely has-beens.

She gripped the wooden railing, and her heart quickened its beat as the long countdown continued. Yes, this promised to be a big shot all right. The newest and most intricately equipped vessel yet devised was going on its shake-down earth orbit. If this were successful, heaven only knew what its eventual mission would be. Anyway, that was beside the point. This morning, she simply knew she had the chance to view at least one launching before her own countdown rolled around.

She turned and peered through the darkness toward another lighted gantry. There was her heap, poised and nearly ready to go, but nowhere near as sleek and elaborate as the

X-DS4. By contrast, hers was large, cumbersome and, as some wise character had pointed out, belonged in the Smithsonian Institution. Her eyes switched back to the new ship. Comparing the two was ridiculous; almost like lining up an old twin-engine, C-47 gooney bird with a dyna-soar or something. Oh, well, beggars couldn't be choosers, and at least her ship had been well tested.

She leaned forward, now mesmerized as the loudspeaker on the blockhouse blared: "T minus five seconds and holding."

Now what could be causing the delay at a time like this? Some little gadget somewhere with a speck of dust on it? No. The ship had been assembled under conditions that were as clean and sterile as those in a hospital operating room. Perhaps the astronauts inside were having difficulty with their pressurization, radios, TV's or any one of the hundreds of equipment parts they must monitor.

A strange, unwelcome feeling of uncertainty crept through the young nurse as she waited out the "holding" moments and her thoughts flashed back to her dad. Why are we going out there? Why are those men leaving sweethearts, wives, children, and the comforts of home to whiz into the inhospitable environment of space? Was it right for her, as dad's only child, to risk her own safety at a time when his health was poor and his finances even worse?

Of course, as long as people were "out there," accidents and sickness were inevitable and she, as a nurse, was responsible for their care. Yet, for the first time, the nagging question of whether dad was right about our foolish concentration on space travel struck her with full force. Were she and the astronauts merely selfish adventurers, or were their lives bound together and dedicated to some tremendous and worthwhile goal? Someday she hoped that question would be answered in her own mind, but for the moment she would force her thoughts back to the events at hand.

The sky became lighter, and Cindy could see a pelican, that lingering relic of primitive aerodynamic design, swoop low over the surf not far away. A sandpiper strutted uncertainly towards the water like a young girl on her first high heels.

The countdown continued. "T . . . minus four . . . three . . . two . . ." She braced herself against the railing, her hands gripping its rough, moist surface. It all seemed so unreal, so automatic but this was because there was not a single human soul in sight. Only the voice over the loudspeaker reminded her that thousands of workers around the Cape were huddled around TV's, telemeters, computers, knobs, switches, and dials. The occupants of the concrete blockhouse were undoubtedly rigid with tense nerves and exhaustion.

"ONE. LIFT-OFF!"

Then it happened. The mighty roar of the booster filled the area and reverberated across the quiet land. Fuel flames, brilliant orange and white, billowed beneath it. For an endless, heart-stopping moment, the ship hung motionless, incredibly balanced above its incandescent tail. Would it upturn and explode before her very eyes, cremating every living thing for miles around?

Slowly it began to climb the sky, then faster and faster until it outraced the roar of its engines and screamed into space.

But what of the men inside? Were they suffering from the brutal G forces of the older spacecraft? No. This much she had learned from the top secret paper she'd read. Instead of taking eighty seconds to get into orbit, the new miraculous fuel was lifting them at a gentler pace, and it would take them nearly an hour to reach orbit.

She sighed with relief as it arched into the high cool air, its widening vapor tail twisting into antic patterns by the winds aloft. It was so beautiful, she could hardly believe it. An ache of pride hardened in her throat as the awesome spectacle disappeared at last.

So spellbound was she that she did not hear the footsteps on the viewing-stand stairs behind her. She was startled by the familiar voice of Dr. Lufkin.

"It kind of gets you right here." He thumped his chest. "Like a Fourth of July parade or the National Anthem. It screams power, doesn't it?"

"Oh. Yes . . . yes I guess that's how I feel." She laughed a little to cover her naïve emotions. "I guess once you've seen a few launches, they all start looking alike. I mean they're not so exciting."

He took her arm and led her down the stairs. "No, there's never an unexciting or routine launch, because no two are exactly alike. A lot can happen, even today with our improved systems." He stopped himself, realizing he had inadvertently forewarned her of unpleasant possibilities surrounding her own flight. "It's not too late to change your mind about going." Then he added gently, "I wouldn't blame you if you begged off. As a physician, I could discover a physical disability at the last minute. You've probably got a hundred symptoms right now that could ground you."

Cindy eyed the jitney that stood ready to take them to Hangar L. She fixed her mouth in a tight smile as her mind searched for the right words to use at a time like this. "When I signed up with the Aerospace Force Nurse Corps, I promised I would go wherever I was needed in peace or in war." (When in doubt, repeat the Flight Nurses' Creed. That's always good.) She cleared her throat and stuck out a stubborn chin. "And a McGee never welshes on a bargain."

"But you hadn't counted on getting orders to the moon." Dr. Lufkin grinned pleasantly, the tanned leathery skin crinkling at the corners of his eyes. Thousands of hours in jets, plus duty at the Space Station, had toughened the rugged little man who was already noted as a human dynamo. He was no more than five feet six and he weighed probably a hundred forty-five, dripping wet.

He took her arm and helped her into the dark green rattletrap jitney. Slamming the doors, he spoke to the sleepy driver, then leaned back against the cool metal wall as they took off across the narrow bumpy roadway. "Okay, moon nurse," he said at last. "But anytime within the next hour or so you decide it's a *no go,* just pucker up your pretty lips and whistle. I'll understand."

It was all very awesome as they pressed the buzzer at Hangar L—like entering a bank vault or something. True, there were thousands of guards in a variety of uniforms, not only here at the Cape but hundreds of miles downrange at islands, where enemy agents might congregate to collect info on our space secrets. Still, as the heavy door creaked open, Cindy felt the tremendous burden of responsibility her country had placed upon her shoulders. She was expected to observe, but not speak of any work that was going on in this building. She could visualize herself at future coffee klatches, sitting there like the three wise monkeys: hear no secrets, see no secrets, and speak no secrets.

Dr. Lufkin led her into a small dispensary and motioned her to sit on a stainless steel stool. Beside her was an instrument with tiny dangling wires and gadgets. "Hope you don't mind carrying a few sensors with—I mean—on you. We'd like to keep track of your physiological changes, if any."

"Oh, no problem," she shrugged lightly. She closed her eyes and pretended it wasn't happening. In a few moments she buttoned on her blouse again, and they started for the main astronauts' dressing room.

As they entered the room where the silvery coated pressure suits hung on hangers, Cindy felt a whole new surge of qualms sweep through her. But, she had promised herself, she would let no one know her true feelings. She forced a small laugh.

"They look like decapitated bodies. There are arms, legs, feet and hands. Everything but heads."

Dr. Lufkin, ignoring her grotesque observation, began pawing through the suits, looking for the one marked Cindy McGee. It had been tailored to her exact proportions . . . just in case. "I wouldn't have asked you to go if it were not an emergency. I need help, and all the male assistants weigh too much."

"I understand. Really I do." But it was nice of him to apologize for the inconvenience.

He pulled out her suit and held it up to her just as a saleslady would hold up a new formal. "I'd say green is more your color, but this will have to do."

His own suit had been tailored to his exact body proportions, and it, too, had his name printed across the left side of the chest. "You see, every ounce of pay load you lift requires fuel. And fuel costs money, even today when the cost of orbiting one pound has dropped from $100,000 to $25,000. We've got to be light going up there because we'll have three good-sized men in casts coming back. Your ninety-five pounds is just under the wire."

He gave her a long, serious look. "It's not going to be easy. The first woman to invade any field that has been exclusively male has a lot to prove. If you can get off to a good start, you'll be all right. You've had good training and you checked out in jets with only minor repercussions." He patted her shoulder and pointed out the dressing room. "I'm going to leave you now because I have to check on our medical supplies." He pursed his lips for a moment as a thought struck him. "Say, what are we going to call this new service we're inaugurating? In the old days it was known as Aeromedical Evacuation, Air Evac for short."

"Gee, I dunno," she said. "How about Moon Evac . . . Space Evac . . . or plain old Aerospace Evac?" She shook her head. "Sounds rather dull and utilitarian."

His eyes brightened with interest, then dulled as a grim prospect presented itself. "You know what our code initials will probably wind up as?"

"No, what?" she asked.

"I can see it now." He slapped the palm of his hand against his forehead. "AERSAC calling earth, one, two, three . . . this is an emergency . . ." He shook his head. "No, Cindy, you'll have to do better than that!"

She nodded her head in agreement. "Okay. I'll sleep on it and see what else comes to mind."

She swallowed hard as he turned and disappeared down the hallway. There went her moral support. Now she was alone.

Once inside the private cubicle, Cindy slipped out of her uniform and into the funny-looking long johns with the patch windows of spongy nylon mesh for air circulation. Next came the bulky suit itself with self-sealing zippers. With all the sensors attached to her body, climbing into the suit was no small chore and she was grateful when help arrived in the person of a young girl technician. The newcomer was nearly as mystified by the complicated dressing procedure as was Cindy; yet each knew that, if the young nurse were to preserve her modesty, they'd have to wrestle with the problems by themselves.

What a maze of mysterious buttons and gadgets with which to cope! Let's see, there was a hose connection at the middle of her stomach that would connect with the ship's air purification system. Oxygen would be piped into her suit and circulated around her body to keep her cool. Then it would mix with her expired breath and be exhausted through the port in the helmet to be reconditioned (the carbon dioxide, water vapor, and odors would be removed and, theoretically, cooled oxygen would be recirculated).

So far so good.

There was a hesitant knock at the door. "Ready?"

She stiffened, gulped, called Yup, and opened the door to clomp into the main astronauts' dressing room, feeling more like an overdressed clown than a nurse. About twenty men stood around, gaping, studying her, and apparently stifling snickers. There were reporters too with top secret clearance tags pinned to their lapels. Thank goodness, they hadn't allowed television cameras inside the building. She swallowed hard as she felt her face burn with embarrassment.

Oh, why must she be stuck with such an old milk-run vehicle instead of a glamorous Mars or Venus one? Still, she knew that the Aerospace Medical Department was lucky to draw even a tin can to do the job.

Before she could get her second wind, reporters were shooting questions at her from all sides. "How do you feel? Are you afraid to be the first woman to go up there? Are women going to take over space flight and leave men behind in the kitchens and nurseries?"

Cindy's mind whirled with confusion. She must not break. She simply must not! Somewhere in the back of her mind, Rosalind's sly words of advice crowded in on her, and she suddenly wished with all her heart that she had even a microscopic bit of that woman's confidence. Desperate, she looked around for Dr. Lufkin, but he had not returned. Now she knew he'd deliberately planned it like this. He wanted her to be on her own, to act, think, and handle the situation in a professional way.

She slumped into the contour couch and put her feet up to have the tailor lace her boots. Thirteen pounds of suit and equipment had exhausted her even in the few moments she had worn them. Fortunately she was hooked up to the cooling device so that she was not perspiring as heavily as before. She wet her lips and began speaking in as even a tone as she could manage. "I would say that space flight is no more severe for women than for men. Women have been around planet Earth for a long time and have taken care of some very important jobs. It's high time that we are given the opportunity to prove ourselves in space flight." Her words sounded horribly stilted but at that point she didn't care. As long as she was putting one word ahead of the other, she was still in business. She hoped, however, that no one noticed how she was beginning to pant.

"I have been asked to do a job in an emergency situation and I will do it to the best of my ability," she continued. She rolled her head to one side. "I will keep a full account of the trip and give you a more complete statement when I return. Now, will you please excuse me?"

Her heart thudded hopefully as she saw the reporters leave the room. She had successfully masked her feelings so far. If only she could continue the act. A woman in a man's world was up against a lot and, as Rosalind had said, you've got to be tough!

She closed her eyes and said a silent prayer. It wouldn't be long before countdown . . . just keep calm, steady, and above all don't act like a woman.

Suddenly she heard a voice she recognized.

> "There was a young lady named Bright,
> Whose speed was faster than light.
> She set out one day,
> In a relative way,
> And returned home the previous night.

Good grief! It was Turk Hunter, the craziest astronaut this side of Alpha Centauri, and he was quoting an ancient limerick from *Punch.* Standing there with his hands on his hips, he looked as smug as a cat locked up in a dairy.

She gulped, then managed to croak, "Astronaut—go home."

But already he was kneeling beside her, adjusting the various gadgets on her suit. He tightened the laces on her boots and poked professionally at the fingertips of her space-suit hands. "Don't tell me *you're* going to be at the controls," she gasped, trying to put down the gladness she felt. "We'll all be killed!"

He looked at her with his sky-blue eyes and showed his strong white teeth in a disgustingly broad grin. "Nice to know I'm appreciated," he said. "Now sit up and let's check your helmet."

She obediently rose and held still while someone plopped a fiber glass globe over her head, twisted and locked it. She knew now how the roast in the pressure cooker felt. Gasping, she pushed up the visor. "Do I have to wear this thing all the time?"

"If you don't have a foolproof meteor bumper, you have to be pretty careful. Old Ironsides isn't the newest model. So . . ." He thumped the side of the helmet with his knuckles. "As you yourself just said, 'Space flight is no more severe for women than for men.' "

She watched him move away from her, pick out his suit, and disappear for a few moments. Soon he, too, was ready for the flight, and she was amazed at the skill and agility of this space madman. "I thought you were grounded after that horrible 'missed moon, making for Mars' nonsense you pulled last month."

"Oh, I was," he said cheerfully as he slipped on the white plastic galoshes that would keep his boots clean. Even a small particle of earthy dirt would not only be annoying but dangerous to the ship's delicate equipment during weightlessness. "But when I heard you were going on this junket, I realized this was the time to get my name in the papers. Mother always appreciates that."

"Astronaut—*please* go home," she said again.

"I'll tell you what." The tailor fitted the helmet over Turk's head. For a moment there was muffled mumbling. He swung open the visor. "If you're a good girl, I'll take you around the corona of the moon and we'll have uh . . . a look at the earth."

"I am not interested," she snapped. "This is strictly a business trip."

He looked at her disappointedly. "Okay."

"Don't be archaic."

He grinned again. "You are a spoilsport. You know that?" He began whistling pleasantly as he sank down in the contour couch nearby and put up his feet.

"There was a young lady from moon,
Who wanted to play the bassoon.
She started to blow,
But with atmosphere low,
Her face turned as blue as . . ."

He turned to her. "What rhymes with moon?"

"Goon," she said without thinking.

He looked hurt. "You needn't be so personal."

The tailor was making the final check on Cindy's suit. Even a small leak would deprive her of oxygen in outer space, and would expose her to deadly cosmic rays. Her neck ached from the heavy material of her suit and helmet, but she dared not admit it.

Tears of frustration threatened to well in her eyes as she looked at the group of technicians and astronauts who were waiting for her to break. If only Brer were here to give her a last-minute briefing. How wonderful it would be to see Ellie and the gang from Adams. But that was childish thinking. This was a moment for which she had trained. The mission would be successful. It *had* to be!

But those men . . . suddenly she hated all of them. They were mean and gloating and horrid. Especially Turk. She tried not to listen to their conversations as she mentally checked her medical supplies. Her lightweight diagnostic kit . . . yes, that was already secured tightly in the ship. There were dozens of tiny bottles of medications including the all-important ones containing bacteriostatic agents. She hoped she would be able to administer them properly at zero gravity, should the need arise.

She thought further. Yes, she'd remembered the tissue-sealing medication for the scientist whose leg had been crushed in the lunar fall. Fortunately his protective suit had not been punctured, or he would have died almost immediately. His leg could possibly be saved *if* he was given immediate attention on the moon and *if* the treatment was continued during the trip back to earth. The others had broken limbs with internal injuries, but with Dr. Lufkin's skill and her assistance, she hoped they would be all right.

She glanced at the transistor clock on the wall. Golly, it wouldn't be long . . . her stomach churned alarmingly but she vowed she would ignore it. Nerves, that was the trouble.

The men had gathered in a circle around her. Someone was helping her to her feet. At first, she tried to jerk her arm away. Then she thought better of it because she was afraid of losing her balance.

"You remind me of a little kid with an arithmetic problem," Turk said, suddenly quite serious.

"Just what do you mean?" Her lip straightened to a tight firm line. "I am getting along perfectly well, thank you."

"I mean that you can't think of the answer, so you erase the question." He put a gloved hand on her shiny shoulder and spoke through his opened visor. "Just relax, Cindy. We're your friends. Look around. Can't you see that?"

She numbly flicked her eyes from one man's face to another's. Good grief, Turk was right. There were grins, yes, but they were all masking the concern and worry they felt for her. The joviality, laughter, and jeers had not been aimed at her but were cover-ups for their fears for her safety. Suddenly she knew what she must do. She was a woman, there was no changing that. She could not act or think like a man if she tried for a million years. Maybe being tough in a man's world was Rosalind's way—but it could never be Cindy's.

There were many ways of showing bravery. Sometimes the bravest thing you have to do is to admit being wrong—to be honest with yourself and others.

She squared her shoulders as best she could and addressed the whole group. "I . . . I am scared. But I think I can make it . . . with your help."

There was a moment of surprised silence, then an audible sigh of relief, then a cheer. "Atta girl, Cindy!"

The tension was broken now as several men scurried away and returned a few minutes later with packages for her to take with her—a stack of Christmas mail and a tape recording of the new Broadway musical, *Venus Vanities*, and, of all things, a small caged rooster for the closed ecological system at the Moon Duty Station. "Someone got itchy fingers last Thanksgiving," it was explained. "I don't know what gets into those people up there. They should know better."

She spied Dr. Lufkin. "I've got the styrofoam for casts already on board," he called out. "The stanchions are up, mesh litters, orlon cocoons for protecting the patients during acceleration and reentry to the earth's atmosphere."

"Well, I guess that's it," Cindy sighed happily. For the first time she was excited and thrilled about her new adventure. She knew she was beaming as she shook hands all around. Someone winked, and she winked right back. The tailor kissed his fingertip and touched her nose. "Time to go out to launch," she managed to quip.

The white transfer van that would take them to the launching pad signaled from outside. Before she knew it, she was staring up at the ship that would take her into the vast, soundless void of space.

She gasped. Why, it wasn't ugly at all, but beautiful as it stood there, tall and straight in the launching pad. The pink light of early dawn glinted on the shiny hull and it was so clean; Cindy was sure she wouldn't mind eating off its engines. An awed chill ran up her spine as she watched the gantry platform clang to the ground and unload an electronics engineer. He tipped his hard hat to her, and she smiled back. Then she was riding the platform, as it rose, and climbing through the entrance lock of the ship.

"Might as well relax," Dr. Lufkin said briskly. "We'll be immobile for nearly an hour before the countdown gets near. They'll have to clear the firing area, and we have to be in here before the gantry is moved away." She nodded mutely as he strapped her into the contour couch.

From where she lay, she could see Turk masterfully going through his checklist. Dr. Lufkin, who was co-navigator, co-engineer, co-everything on the flight, was busy with his duties. As the minutes ticked by, the incessant chatter on her headphones became a blurred jumble. She swallowed to ease the drying in her throat, remembering again what apprehension can do to the pit of the stomach. Below them, she knew hundreds of people and machines were scurrying about in the damp dawn; ground people were talking from the blockhouse, yet she could not escape the intense feeling of aloneness once that hatch was closed and locked.

At last she realized the jointed crane, called the cherry picker, was backing away. The natural air in the cabin had been blown out and was replaced with a helium oxygen mixture at one-half sea level pressure. Her head began to ache and she closed her eyes to hear the hum of the gyros and the rustling of the blowers of the ship's air-conditioning system.

"T minus sixty seconds."

She snuggled deeper into her couch and waited. It was all so unreal . . . so impossible . . . like a dream. Perhaps she would wake up and find herself snug and warm in her bed at Adams. She'd read stories like that, where the heroine was hanging from a cliff by her fingertips and then she wakes up and . . .

"T minus thirty seconds."

The umbilical cord of tubing and cables that had been supplying electricity and communications fell free. She heard an unfamiliar voice from the blockhouse say, "God bless you, Cindy," as the countdown panel above her eyes hit six . . . five . . . four . . .

Suddenly she glanced over at Turk. There was a small patch of green stuff with a bit of red ribbon on it. It was tied to the panel above him. Good grief . . . could it be? Yes. Cindy gripped the armrests and smiled. It was a sprig of mistletoe.

"Three . . . two . . . one. IGNITION! MAIN-STAGE! LIFT-OFF!"

Thunderclaps reunited for a brief instant beneath her as the granddaddy of all explosions flared like a giant spectrum. The roar was deafening now as the ship's powerful engines consumed ton after ton of solid propellants. The sound exploded through the ship and into her helmet, sending sharp arrows of pain. Her body strained and her ears throbbed, but so far, her thoughts were clear and concise. Except for the sound, the sensations of launching were almost nonexistent.

"Check position of abort switch."

"Roger." But Turk did not use the "chicken switch" as it was sometimes called. She could hear shouts of sheer delight and exuberance in her headset, telling her the launch had been successful.

Only a minute from the launch pad, she began to feel the pressure growing steadily as the ship's powerful engines found less resistance to the thrust in the upper atmosphere. It was like a surging crushing elevator gone mad, as the weight of a hundred mountains engulfed her, pushing her down and down into the couch until it seemed she would come out the other side. Her chest and ribs hurt, and she heard herself groan involuntarily as perspiration beaded her forehead. Hold on, Cindy. Hold on, she told herself fiercely.

After what seemed a lifetime, there was a momentary respite as the first stage rocket burned out and was blown off. How many G's had she withstood? She did not know nor care. The important thing was she could still count herself among the conscious living. Once more she marveled at the body-crushing forces sustained by the pioneer astronauts: Shepard, Grissom, Glenn, and the others. This trip would be kid stuff to them.

The engines of the second stage fired, and acceleration rose bringing even greater G-force pressure than before. The needle of the velocity indicator went up and up. In the old days, space capsules had to go 25,000 miles an hour to escape earth's gravity. Now with improved cabin pressurization—that was not exactly it because they could not make use of the outside atmosphere—and improved fuel systems they could hit orbit at a slower pace. Still, they swung upward fast, faster, fastest, up through vibration at the speed of sound—mach one, mach two, beyond the roughness of maximum aerodynamic pressures, up into the atmosphere's geography. Names like troposphere, stratosphere, ozonosphere and ionosphere would become realities because she would be *there*. The second stage was shut off and detached.

She knew that when the third stage rocket took over it would stay with them, giving them the necessary velocity to reach the moon. This same stage would fire its rockets to retard speed when their ship came in for the moon landing.

She was startled out of her fuzzy musings as Turk's voice crackled over her headset. "This is mercy ship 58V. Do you read me?"

"Roger 58V. Full report requested."

Turk rambled on, discussing the working order of what seemed like each component in the vast ship. He wound it up in a throat-clearing episode. "Special report on woman-in-space."

Cindy braced herself, wondering if anyone guessed what she had gone through, how scared she was, how peculiar she still felt. Of course, the tattletale sensors attached to her body would indicate the physical stresses her body had endured. But she clung to the hope that at least a few secrets would remain locked in her heart. They were still traveling at a terrific speed, and they were not yet in weightlessness. This was only the beginning, really. What would Turk have to say in his official report?

She listened hard.

"There once was an aerospace nursey
Who went to the moon unrehearsy.
She took all those G's
With a positive breeze
Now she's well on her mission of mercy."

Cindy stifled a laugh of relief. "Oh, no. I can't stand it. Must I be subjected to that kind of torture for the next quarter of a million miles?"

Turk snorted indignantly. "Okay, you can just get out and walk if you don't like the company in here."

"FLASH! ! ! Around the world newscast. The news as it happens. The mercy spaceship is launched and well on its way. At the controls are Dr. Peter Lufkin and astronaut Turk Hunter. Radio reports indicate that the world's first moon nurse held up nicely during acceleration through earth's atmosphere. The ship will soon be weightless, ladies and gentlemen and . . ." he turned to his assistant. "Elmer, hand me that pill . . . no not that one you st . . . I mean, yes, the green one." He swallowed it quickly and washed it down with what appeared to be water. He smiled sweetly into the camera as he hugged the earphones to the side of his head. The smile faded.

"We seem to be having difficulty receiving further word from the mercy ship. We are sorry, the news at this time is sketchy. There seems to be static or ham radio interference. But wait . . . now we are receiving clearly. It sounds as though . . . yes . . . believe me . . . they *are* singing Christmas carols as their mercy vehicle hurls itself through space."

His shoulders sagged dramatically. He placed a hand across his heart. "Yes, ladies and gentlemen . . ." Elmer passed him a tissue for the moisture that suddenly collected in his eyes, "our own Cindy McGee will be a silver lining to the Moon Station this year, even if there are no clouds to go with it."

## 6

Dr. Lufkin raised a gloved hand. "That'll be enough out of the chorus. It uses too much oxygen. Besides," he pointed to his helmeted ears, "the helium mixture in here raises your pitch till you sound like a couple of chipmunks."

Turk swiveled his head around. "More poetry then?"

"Negative. There's work to do. Cindy, you okay back there?"

"I think so," she squeaked into her mike.

"All right. Get ready to push that yellow button beside your couch. Wait for my signal."

"Roger."

She braced herself for the last straining burst of speed. There was a moment of suspension as the hideous pressure of acceleration relaxed, then disappeared, and was replaced by the oddest feeling of exhilaration she'd ever known. Her stomach came unglued for a moment, then miraculously settled back in place. Through the blurred dizziness, it seemed everything she'd ever counted on deserted her. A loose bolt floated by and was sucked into the ship's filtering system. Saliva formed in her mouth but she swallowed it quickly before it went up her nose.

A wonderful cloud of ethereality enveloped her. It was as if she had ceased existing in a body and had become a ghostly spirit. Maybe she had died in that last burst of speed . . maybe she was experiencing the secret phenomenon of death. Maybe this was *it* or had been *it*, or something.

But no. Her mind was still alive and active. She could see and hear and feel, which meant that her body simply had to be alive. It just didn't weigh anything, that was all. And she realized with wonder and fascination that her body was following the same, unpowered trajectory that the ship was following. She, in essence, was a living, breathing spaceship herself!

True, she had experienced zero gravity for a minute and a half when she flew the parabolic curve during training and later when Rosalind had checked her out in the jet ride. What other way was there to learn the limits to which space travelers could be pushed, except by preflight testing? Yet, as General Craig had pointed out, there was a vast difference between controlled testing and the real thing. To be alone out here, the three of them weightless, so far, far away from home in a void so quiet and still she could hear her hair grow, was an experience impossible to duplicate on earth.

"This is it, Cindy. Push the button."

She did so, and immediately her contour couch turned from a prone to a sitting position. Now in her rearview periscope, she could see the whole world spread out in a panorama of amazing clarity.

"Oh, it's beautiful," she breathed. "Beautiful."

"Hold tight. You ain't seen nuthin yet," Turk called out cheerily. By now each man had removed his helmet and one glove. They urged her to do likewise so that she would be more comfortable. If all went well, the ship's air purification system and oxygen supply would hold them during the flight. Their air-cooled suits would keep their body temperatures at the proper level. Cindy gasped with alarm as Turk leaned forward and pushed the override button of the yaw attitude control. That crazy astronaut was turning the ship around to face earth!

Dr. Lufkin, sensing her fright, explained that the ship could be turned to any attitude, backward, sideways or upside down without changing its velocity or direction of flight. "We took off to the east so the ship would get a boost from the west-to-east spin of the earth. We'll orbit once before heading out."

She breathed a sigh of relief. As the earth, swathed in cloud veils and patterned with oceans and continents, spread out before her eyes, she was filled with awe and wonder. There was the vast Atlantic very much as it was on her globe at home, but this time it was real . . . real. Without even squinting her eyes, she could see the islands of the West Indies and even the western coast of Africa. A huge saber stretched out to her right and left.

"And the dawn came up like thunder out of China cross the bay . . ." quoted Turk. The saber grew larger by the second as the ship sped away from the earth's shadow. How strange to see dawn creeping over the earth hundreds of miles below. The flaming corona of the sun appeared, followed by the sun itself in all its brilliance. The great sprawling Indian Ocean appeared and then the lush verdant jungles and craggy mountains of the mysterious East.

Raising her eyes, she saw a skyful of unblinking polka dots of red, white, and blue. These were the stars of the universe with the fog of earth's atmosphere dropped magically away, clearly visible in the brightest sun she had ever seen. It was so beautiful she wanted to cry but decided against it as she remembered that her tears would float away, rather than trickle down her cheeks.

"Are you reading me in spaceship 58V? Please acknowledge."

"You're coming in loud and clear."

"How's Cindy?" Her name sounded funny when it was pronounced with a foreign accent.

Turk glanced around at her and grinned. "A-okay at zero G. Moon nurse sitting fat."

"Well!" she fumed inwardly. "I like that!"

Each new tracking station asked the same question and Turk's replies got worse as they went along. "A-okay at zero G. Nurse guarantees moon mission as surefire system for losing weight."

She shook her fist. "Honestly, Turk!"

Finally he responded, "How's the moon nurse? Oh, wait till she gets off my lap and I'll ask her."

Cindy's scream of protest only heightened the effect. She gritted her teeth. What would those serious scientists and technicians all over the world think of her? She hoped no one would be so cruel as to turn the verbatim messages over to the press or TV announcers. The ridiculous mistletoe sprig, carefully wrapped in pliofilm and tied securely over Turk's panel, dangled threateningly. Cindy tightened her lips with stubborn resolve. If that crazy astronaut figured on charming her with his usual nonsense just because they were literally out of the world together, he had another think coming. With her, it would be strictly business . . . her professional duties came first, and that was that.

She resolved further. If he planned on adding her name to that list of swooning females who flocked around him wherever he went, he could just forget it. Besides, a girl had to be practical about becoming attached to someone. As a nurse, she had enough to think about without the added worry of a fellow whose life was dedicated to such long-distance business trips. No, if she ever became serious about any man, it would be a nice solid, steady earthbound type.

A funny little twinge of excitement crept up her spine and rippled across her scalp. There *was* something about him though. Something that made her heart sing in spite of her efforts to keep it quiet.

He called back to her. "Why don't you unstrap yourself and float up to see us?"

"So you can make more remarks about me over your radio? No thanks," she said firmly. Then surprised herself by adding, "Maybe a little later."

The intense white ball that was the sun disappeared, and night overtook their ship. Cindy was startled to realize their day had lasted just forty-five minutes. Her last glimpse of earth had shown Australia ahead, clearly in view. Now, out the porthole, the Milky Way made a shimmering ribbon of light against a sky of ebony velvet. The Big Dipper swung into sight. Myriads of multicolored, pure, unblinking stars like a universal Christmas tree reminded her of summer nights back home when she would lie on the hammock and stare at them through the fuzzy blanketing atmosphere. They had been beautiful then, but not like this.

How silent it was out here, without even a whisper of a sound. There were no weather, no turbulence, no temperature, nothing but millions of stars and galaxies, each as large or larger than her own. As far as the eye could see and beyond, galaxies were being born or dying. Life was appearing, and mosses and lichens were forming on rocky outcrops . . . cells were multiplying in lava-warmed water. Life out there? Yes, of course. It had been proven years ago.

But what else was out there? Space was not empty as people once thought. That innocent-looking soundless vacuum contained plenty of hazards that still mystified earth's scientists.

Although she could not see them at the moment, she knew the sky was streaked with small tufts of glowing rock, glass and metal fragments—meteors! The cosmic debris, circling the sun in loose swarms at a speed of between 40,000 and 130,000 miles per hour, could spell death if they went astray. Even a pebble-sized one could vaporize the steel hull of their ship and expose them to deadly cosmic rays. Traveling at the speed of light, this cosmic flak came from the sun and distant galaxies. Mostly hydrogen and helium atoms stripped of their orbital electrons, the tiny pellets would expose the crew to cosmic ray primaries instead of the secondary cosmic rays which seep through earth's protective atmospheric blanket. She remembered that the most energetic and dangerous particles were concentrated at an altitude of two thousand miles. There was another peak at 10,000 miles. Even without a meteor puncture, an overexposed ship could not protect its occupants from aging as much as three years. The only way to beat the problem was to avoid orbiting in those deadly belts and to design spaceships that would give spacemen double protection against cosmic hazards. If they had to enter those belts, they would make it fast—and not too often.

Thank goodness, their ship was divided into two airtight compartments with an air lock in between. In case of a meteor shower, the ship's alarm bell and also a warning light would tell them in time so that they could quickly don their helmets and gloves. If the ship were punctured, they could disperse to the other compartment until the self-sealing fluid contained in the space between the double outer hull made the necessary repairs. Yes, it seemed as though they had adequate protection in *getting* there. But what about coming back? There would be three helpless patients in her care. She had jolly well better familiarize herself with her soaring hospital ward.

She glanced around at the cabin. It was tightly sealed because, unlike low flying aircraft, they could not use oxygen from the atmosphere above 50,000 feet. At 63,000 feet, outside air pressure was so low that body fluids would evaporate and boil away. Their bodies, if exposed, would be like dried prunes in no time.

She took a deep breath, extremely grateful for the protection of the ship's double hull and fresh air she was breathing. The ship was equipped with a special apparatus that converted the carbon dioxide exhaled by the crew into oxygen. This was done by capturing the carbon dioxide, mixing it with hydrogen and passing it through a heated tube to form solid carbon and water vapor. Finally, the water was broken up by electrolysis to separate the hydrogen from the oxygen, returning the oxygen to the air.

Simple, eh? No. It had taken her a week to comprehend the process when she'd studied it in classes.

Day arrived as quickly as day departed. The sun burst over the horizon and now she could see North America as the ship completed the first orbit.

"Hold onto your hat, Cindy. We're off to the moon!"

"Oh, no." She somehow visualized herself as being shot out of a rubber band, then swallowed the lump of homesick nostalgia forming in her throat. Earth, that funny little place she used to think of as being so big and incomprehensible, was now moving away, shrinking like a tired grapefruit or to be more accurate, a very fat pear. Columbus was right. It certainly wasn't flat!

She hoped Turk and Dr. Lufkin knew what they were doing up at the control panels because now things were really popping. There were literally hundreds of gauges, gadgets, and knobs to check. While Turk went over the electrical system in a surprisingly masterful way, Dr. Lufkin checked the temperatures of the liquid oxygen and water storage tanks, the air-conditioning system and propellant tanks.

Turk looked up and waved to her. "Come on, Cindy. You can't sit there like a stick-in-the-mud for the next sixty hours."

When she hesitated, Dr. Lufkin pointed out that she ought to learn something about the functions of the ship . . . just in case.

Somewhat uncertainly, she unfastened the safety strap holding her to the seat. She knew the trick was to have hold of something all the time, so she wouldn't float pell-mell into the ceiling or bump against the cabin walls. The magnetized soles of her boots would help, but only partially.

She made what she thought was a firm lunge for the safety rings attached to the wall. Immediately she knew she should have removed the thick glove, as the men had done, because her gloved fingers functioned like warm, moist cotton as they groped for the ring. Oh no! She careened off the wall, bumping her shoulder as she did so. Now she was swooping aimlessly, helplessly in a spread eagle pose without even the grace of a swan diver. Without thinking, she squealed, flapped her arms, and tried to kick her feet. It only made things worse. "Do something, somebody!" she yelled as her head and shoulders dipped and swerved while her feet flailed wildly above.

Turk was laughing so hard he was of no use to anyone. Finally he sang something that sounded like "Daisy*. . . Daisy . . . in a spacesuit built for two . . ." There was no use throwing a monkey wrench at him. It couldn't possibly connect.

Dr. Lufkin was shaking with mirth, but mercifully his better sense finally came to the rescue. "You'd better come down, Cindy. You're on TV you know."

"Oh, my word!" she gasped. "MY WORD!"

By now she had floated into the circular control room in the ship's nose with the two contour couches for pilot and co-pilot, and a computer between them. Arched over the couches at the middle was a huge instrument board. But what was alarming were the TV cameras pointed at her from all directions. She saw herself in the monitor set as she sailed by. Mortification. Pure unadulterated mortification!

"If somebody doesn't get me down soon, I'll break something," she threatened. "And it would serve you right."

If she weren't rescued soon, she would literally expire. With cameras still aimed in her direction, she found herself directly beneath that infernal sprig of mistletoe. Turk, holding to his safety ring with one hand, finally condescended to haul her down. He clumsily planted a kiss in the general vicinity of her nose, then frowned disappointedly into the camera.

"Ladies, does your spaceman miss you? If so, try Grav-a-lip lipstick . . . containing G-R-A-V-I-T-Y."

He considered allowing her to sit on his lap. "Stop it," she said.

Turk was deep in thought. "I'll make a fortune with this jingle. What rhymes with gravity?"

"You know perfectly well," she snapped as she eased herself to the far wall, making sure she was firmly anchored at all times. "Depravity."

He shook his head sadly. "There you go, getting personal again." He made his way toward her, grasped her hand and together they floated to a fascinating panel she had not seen before. "If you're going to be so ornery, you may as well growl at this machine for a while."

Cindy did the best she could to measure the radiation dosage they'd accumulated in the Van Allen belt. Fortunately it was within the safety limits.

"What's next?" she asked, then stopped herself as she realized they were checking their navigation. She must not disturb them with silly questions; accuracy in space travel was not a hit-and-miss routine but a life and death matter. If their ship was launched off course by only one minute, it would miss the moon by thousands of miles. Or if the initial speed should be off by one percent, they could not only miss their target but run out of fuel. Fortunately the earth's tracking stations flashed radar signals regularly, and the ship's repeater beacon bounced them back. Since radar pulses travel with the speed of light, their elapsed travel time measured the distance between earth and Cindy's ship. She was suddenly conscious of the real distance they had traveled when she noticed it had taken nearly a second, after radioing a status report to earth, to receive an answer. If those waves travel at 186,000 miles a second, that meant . . .

Dr. Lufkin signaled to her to join him in floating up to the astrodome to shoot the stars. "We may be a bit off course," he explained.

Again there was the breathtaking thrill of seeing the stars closeup but this time she used a coelostat, a telescope with a built-in periscope. Dr. Lufkin fitted a rubber guard over her right eye so that her left eye could press tightly against the instrument. After a few moments he took a look, fiddled with the controls, then fed the data into the ship's electronic computer. He glanced at the results, raised his eyebrows to indicate moderate surprise, started the flywheels of the attitude control system, and waited for the ship to turn slightly. A timer started the rocket motor for an instant, and the accelerometer shut it off again.

He turned to her and smiled, the lines in his weathered face crinkling at the corners of his eyes. "Now," he said, "I've got some rather alarming news for you."

She blinked her surprise. "Alarming? After what I've just been through, I can't think of a thing that would faze me."

He stretched his arms wide and yawned. "The truth is, Cindy, there's not one cotton pickin' thing to do now except make a status report once in a while, wait, eat, sleep, and think. Grim, eh?"

"We could play bridge if we only had a fourth," she suggested. "Too bad they didn't give us Aristotle, the Chimp, as a passenger instead of the rooster. He'd probably beat us though." She pondered amusedly. "By the way, how's the rooster doing?"

"Still sedated in the baggage compartment."

There was a long, dark, silent pause. "I know," Turk said. "Let's play post office."

"No," she said emphatically.

He pointed to his walk-around container of oxygen. "Spin the bottle?"

She could not help laughing. "Honestly, Turk, I don't know what you're using for brains these days."

He snorted indignantly. "My records show I am, quote, emotionally mature, highly intelligent and," he raised one eyebrow and winked, "extremely well poised in unusual situations."

"The testing computers must have broken down the day you had your . . ."

"Here. Here," Dr. Lufkin piped up. "Rule number one of space travel is that the occupants get along and remain compatible at all times."

"Compatible!" she sputtered. "With that . . .?"

"Come on, Cindy. Let's kiss and make up."

She held tight to the safety ring but managed to put one hand on her hip. Fortunately her feet stayed in place for a change. "This place is beginning to remind me of Disneyland or something. No wonder women have been kept earthbound all this time. Why, if all space jockeys behave so abominably . . ."

A buzzer sounded, interrupting their exchange. She was surprised to see Turk's shoulders slump disgustedly as he immediately went to work. "Good old conditioned reflexes," he muttered. "Just call me Pavlov's dog."

"Saved by the bell," observed Cindy.

Dr. Lufkin grinned. "Turk's taking his three-month checkout in spatial discrimination. Poor guy. I'll have to go through it myself next trip." He eyed the clock on the cabin wall. "Tell you what. Why don't you go have some chow while I figure out a duty schedule. Four on and four off ought not to be too bad."

"Eat?" she asked, still feeling the hard, tight knot in her stomach. "Is it absolutely necessary? I mean, sir, is it an order?"

"It is."

She nodded and headed for the compact kitchen area By now she had gotten used to her weightlessness and was pretty well able to control her movements by hanging tight to the safety rings. Eyeing the busy men over her shoulder, she realized she would have to tackle this task completely alone. It was just as well because it might turn into another disastrous fiasco.

She pulled down the single seat and snapped the leg clamps over her thighs. Secure at last, she pondered what she could possibly choke down in the way of food, and, of course, *how* she would do it. Thank goodness, she'd seen a mock-up of the kitchen back at Adams where some of her dietician friends had set up housekeeping. It occurred to her that a woman testing another woman's planned meals under actual space conditions was not a bad idea. How well she remembered that the worst possible patient, the one most likely to criticize, was another nurse. Hmmmmm. The food had better be good.

The kitchen itself was not only compact but colorful, with its plaid ceramic decorations across the miniaturized refrigerator and freezer, both thermoelectrically fueled. All of this was within reach of her clamped-down position, as were the three-cavity heating oven, the water system with its own heater, and the disposal unit for dry and wet waste. Of course, there were no pots and pans to fly around to bang up the astronauts and their instruments. The food was precooked, dehydrated, and ready-to-serve, once it was heated or chilled.

What would she choose for her dinner?

She decided on dehydrated cream of mushroom soup, canned filet of sole, dehydrated mashed potatoes, canned buttered string beans, bread and butter, and frozen strawberries. She would top this off with dehydrated coffee.

Well, here goes nothing! She pulled down the pivoted storage shelf, selected the container, then popped it into the oven. Slumping her shoulders, she prepared herself for the long, silent, boring wait. She'd always hated eating alone. Now with her nervous stomach, the prospect seemed grim indeed. Of course, she didn't expect checkered tablecloths, flickering candles, and singing violins but . . .

What is this? Music via a tape from up front and the song, "Dinner for One, Please James." The sultry songstress moaned the lament as a full orchestra sympathized musically in the background. The sound was so clear, so perfect, Cindy could close her eyes and feel they were in the ship with her. Oh, how good it was to hear music. She had not realized how the absence of sound, sight, and smell had begun to work on her nerves. Good old sensory deprivation had closed in without her even knowing. But Turk knew. His timing was perfect and, she admitted, it was nice of him to do this for her. Perhaps he had an ounce of intelligence after all.

Along with the song, Turk played a tape of ambient noises, the kind she would hear at home but had never appreciated until they were gone. There was the whisper of the wind, the rustling of leaves, the hum of insects, and even the hum of electronic equipment about the house, going on and off. When the song ended, she listened hard for the crowd's muffled conversations. Even polite coughs sounded good.

She checked the time. Her food was warm now, and strangely enough a real wave of good old earthy hunger passed through her, as she reached for the oversized "toothpaste" tube of soup. She squeezed the warm mixture into her mouth. There was no difficulty in swallowing, once she got the hang of it. The filet of sole was a bit more complicated, but soon she had attached a mouthpiece to one end of the can and a ratchet-squeezing device to the other. It was something like an old-fashioned potato masher, and it worked in almost the same manner. Slowly, but firmly, she cranked the plunger and forced the fish course into her mouth. Why, it was really quite good. She must remember to tell the girls if, no, when she got home.

Drinking coffee reminded her of the babies in pediatrics who gurgled happily with their plastic bottles and nipples. Still, she realized that undignified or no, the system was better than having her coffee simply float away. She was glad she did not have to contend with the quantities of algae, usually referred to as space spinach, that the deep-space men consumed. Who would ever have thought that the green slime she'd seen floating on stagnant pools or clinging to moist rocks back on earth would prove so valuable to space travelers? Carried in tanks aboard the newer spacecraft, algae absorbed the carbon dioxide exhaled by astronauts, while at the same time produced oxygen for them to breathe. As a food, it was "all head and no tail"; ideal because it was high protein and low residue. About 30 percent of deep-space explorers' diets consisted of algae stew, soup, salad, casserole, hash, and oh yes, algaeburger. She knew, of course, that at the Luna City moon colony, which was their destination, the men were addicted to algae cookies and she vowed she'd be a good sport about sampling the green goodies.

When she'd finished eating, she cleaned her face and mouth with a wash'n'dry cloth, then popped it into the covered container. It seemed as if the whole performance had taken hours but she realized as she grasped the safety rings and floated back to her couch, time and space were the two things of which they had plenty.

Strapped in her couch again, she pressed the button that would allow her to recline a bit while she dozed and listened to the music. As her mind wandered, she was only vaguely aware of Turk and Dr. Lufkin taking their turns at the kitchen. Strange how space travel had a reputation for being hardship duty. It was, of course, but it did have compensations. For instance, this was the first time in years she'd had time to relax completely—and think. She knew that her entire physiological structure was slowed down at zero gravity, which over a long period of time, would be detrimental to her health. For this trip, however, it was an enforced vacation, physically and mentally.

She wished dad could have such a rest. To orbit awhile in a convalescent hospital would be wonderful therapy for his tired, overworked heart. Such a hospital was deemed too expensive for any government to consider. Besides the stress of getting patients to and from such a place would be too much, even in the latest vehicles.

She pictured him, big, heavyset with thin red hair streaked with gray. Was he behaving himself, taking it easy on the living room couch in the rambling frame house, or was he racing along the highway in answer to somebody's sick call? Oh, if only Cindy had had a sister or brother . . . or if mother hadn't died so long ago. Ellie, of course, would keep in close touch. All Cindy could do now was hope and pray that things would go well at home so that she could concentrate on the tasks immediately at hand.

Cindy sighed and opened her eyes. People were complicated but fascinating. She wondered about the looneys she would meet at Luna City and vowed she would *not* call them by that ridiculous name, even to herself.

She was startled out of her reverie by Turk's voice calling, "Come on up and watch the late, late, late show."

"Do I bring my own popcorn?" she quipped as she unbuckled her seat strap.

"No. Wait till the commercial. I'll rustle up something in the kitchen."

As she floated up forward, past Dr. Lufkin snoozing peacefully in his bunk, she was surprised to feel so at home here in this strange situation. She buckled herself into the co-pilot's couch, tilted back, and put her feet up. She watched

Turk's rugged yet boyish profile, silhouetted against the screen as he fiddled with the knobs. Yes, it *was* kind of nice to have a couple of men around the house.

They had been gone from earth for fifty hours and traveled nine-tenths of the way when the ship passed the neutral line between the gravitational fields of the earth and the moon. The ship's initial cutoff speed had dropped gradually until it coasted at hardly more than that of conventional jets. Now it began falling, falling, with increasing speed. With no atmosphere to slow the ship down, they could crash into the moon at six thousand miles an hour if . . .

The automatic alarm buzzer notified Dr. Lufkin that it was time to be up and at 'em.

"Better strap down, Cindy. Helmet, gloves, the works."

"Roger," she managed to say. It would be the same thing as taking off, only in reverse. She was conscious now of Turk pushing the yaw attitude control switch that turned the ship around so that it was flying tail first towards the moon. There was no four on, four off work schedule now as both men worked feverishly testing, guiding, sending, and receiving messages. Good heavens, there was a full two-second interval of silence in radio contact with earth. Radar pulses, beamed to the moon, echoed back. At just the right distance, the radar altimeter cut in the retro-rockets to slow their speed.

Now Cindy could see the approaching crater landscape. She knew Luna City was located in a shallow crater near the moon's north pole where the temperatures were moderate because of the sun's low elevation. They would land when the sun was low enough to cast long shadows and show them the locations of rocks and crevasses. Although the area had been explored, there was always the chance of an undetected hazard.

"Do you want to take it, or shall I?" Turk asked Dr. Lufkin.

"Doesn't matter, although I need it on my record."

"Roger. Go ahead."

The trick was to control the thrust of the rocket motors in such a way that both altitude and rate of descent would become zero simultaneously. They would float down like a helicopter.

When they were a few thousand feet above the surface, Turk lowered the four hydraulic spider legs. A fifth one acting like a spike blasted down through the center of the fiery exhaust.

Slowly now, they hovered like a delicate humming bird, testing, gently, lower . . . lower. Cindy's tongue felt like dry sandpaper in the roof of her mouth. She could not believe what was happening. It just wasn't so. She felt a shock as the spike jammed into the ground. The ship dangled precariously like a quivering arrow, then settled as the four spider legs took their firm hold.

"Well, Cindy old girl, we made it." Turk's voice crackled through her headset. "Come on out. Let's pay a visit to that old Man on the Moon."

## 7

THE MOON!

Could it be true? Were they really standing here on the crusty dusty sister of earth? The view was grand but at the same time desolate. There were no green things growing, no trees, shrubs, or flowers. No skyscraper apartments crowded the horizon, no streamlined cars sped along freeways, as they did back home.

She gazed at the pockmarked face of the moon which scientists had often called "a meteorite history book." Without atmosphere, meteor showers had pelted down undisturbed through aeons upon aeons. Since it was now early dawn of the long lunar day, slanting shadows lay all around and extended for miles across the crater in which they had landed. The crater itself was all shades of gray, but streaked here and there with slivers of red or burnt yellow. Mountains as high as Mount Everest towered in steep peaks or leveled into crusty plateaus. There was no sound here on the airless moon—and no smell. But the sights were positively exotic!

The shadows, Cindy knew, would shorten as the sun rose higher in the sky. By noon, they would almost vanish. But wait. Noon was still five days away. By that time they would be well on their way back to earth.

The plan was to spend a few days at Luna City colony preparing the patients for evacuation to earth. While they were about it, they *should* check the general health of everyone here.

She was vaguely aware of the cargo vehicle that had pulled up alongside their ship. Their own transportation would be along shortly, she was told.

She was grateful for the light-scattering visor on her helmet and the automatic functioning, light- and heat-absorbing glasses of photoreactive material that protected her eyes. To look at the sun, even with eyes squinted, would be perilous because of the absence of any protective atmosphere. Now she could see it close to the horizon, surrounded by brilliant untwinkling stars. Without any light-reflecting and light-scattering medium, it hung like a great luminous disk in a permanently black sky. It appeared more bluish in color than it did from earth, rather like a stage floodlight.

There was dust, dust everywhere. Without water, wind, and rain which were earth's housekeepers, the Man-in-the-Moon's face was very dirty indeed.

Turk spoke to her through his radio receiver transmitter. "Take a look at the old home place, Cindy."

Home? There it was, her own earth, opposite the sun and also close to the horizon. It reflected a bluish light back to the moon and was nearly four times as large as the moon had always appeared to her. It was eighty times brighter than a full moon and was so beautiful she could hardly bear it. Trailing behind it, was a small gaseous streak, a geotail. She stared hard and her pulse suddenly quickened with excitement. Why, it was incredible but true. She could actually see Padre Island, Manhattan Island and . . . yes, there was the Grand Canyon.

"We're not so far away after all," Turk observed. "In fact I can almost smell my mother's southern fried chicken."

"Is that your favorite dish?" she asked.

"Yeah. That and apple pie and . . .," he faced her, helmet to helmet, "but darling, this is so sudden. I'd be delighted to have a home cooked dinner just as soon as we get back."

"Don't be silly. I was just curious about the care and feeding of crazy astronauts. It all comes under the heading of research." She turned away a bit to see approaching figures crunching over the porous surface. All of them were dressed alike in heavy space suits but distinguished from one another by lettered names, ranks, and serial numbers on their helmets. Without these protective suits, they would have no oxygen and would risk the chance of their body fluids boiling away. If their suits were punctured, consciousness would last about fifteen seconds. What fascinated her most were the long floating strides; at least fifteen feet was a normal moon-step with only one-sixth of gravity. She must remember to call them selenauts instead of looneys.

"Man, are we glad to see you!" It was Joe Potter, the official greeter, who thrust out a gloved hand.

"We're glad to be here," Dr. Lufkin said. "Hope we can be of service."

There was a shuffling amongst the heavily clad figures and what appeared to be sign language. She could make absolutely nothing out of the gibberish she heard in her headset. Finally, she heard, "Ask 'em. You know what, Joe? Ask which one is the . . . the . . . aw, Joe . . ."

Cindy blushed inside her helmet as Turk pointed her out: "Behold, we have brought a lovely flower to this desolate wilderness. A wild Irish rose, to be exact."

There was a hush as the reception committee appraised her. She wondered if they could hear the excited beating of her heart. She was certain she could hear theirs. What a ridiculous looking picture we must make, she thought. And what does one say at a time like this? "Hello, everybody," she ventured the phrase.

"Hello," they chorused. Before she could get her second wind they were bombarding her with questions. How did she like the trip . . . how long could she stay . . . were other dames er women coming up here . . . where's the marryin' chaplain . . .?

Joe put up his hand. "Hold it, boys. You're forgetting your manners. We'll take our guest back to the base so she can wash her face and hands or do whatever women do."

Turk suddenly seemed quite annoyed to find himself shoved into the background. He muttered something about hoping no one would forget that this was supposed to be a mercy mission.

After much shuffling around and further conversation about who was riding with whom, Cindy found herself chugging along in the rocket-powered, donut-shaped lunarmobile. Joe was briefing Dr. Lufkin on the colony's current problems. "Things have really been tough, Doc. Especially since the accident with those three guys laying around moanin' and groanin', and everybody thinking about Christmas back home."

"We got here as soon as we could," Dr. Lufkin explained. "I understand they're under sedation."

"Oh, sure. The med tech is a good fellow. He watches the patients constantly, but he nearly flipped a couple of times when the real sick one almost passed out on him."

Cindy asked how many selenauts were currently on duty?

"Twenty," Joe said, obviously pleased with her use of the more dignified job classification. "We're set up for thirty-five or forty but it's hard to get men up here, even for a three-month tour."

"I should think it would be fascinating, especially for astronomers and geologists. Astrophysicists and radiologists should have a field day," Cindy observed.

"Oh, they're fine for a while. They tear around gathering samples and making big talk. They stare at the earth and the stars; they meter and measure everything in sight and guess about the rest. But after a while," he shook his head, "they start acting like . . ." He stopped himself. "I'd better not say."

"It might help if you would," Dr. Lufkin suggested. "A medical problem is certainly our business."

"Oh, I'm not talking about medical problems."

Since they landed three miles fom the city, they were well over the horizon from Luna City. Now Cindy could see domes nestled together in the distant crater. "No," Joe continued, "most of the men stay healthy enough if they follow the rules. It's the other stuff, like looking at the same old faces day in and day out." He grinned at Cindy. She still could not tell what he looked like behind the helmet. "That's just a figure of speech since our day lasts for fourteen days."

"Do they get bored?" she asked.

"I dunno. But they start stirring up trouble and pretty soon somebody gets the 'big eye' and winds up with the 'long eye.' "

"What's that?" she asked incredulously. "Is it a problem for an ophthalmologist?"

"Nope," he said. "Just wait. You'll see."

"By the way," Dr. Lufkin spoke up. "Who is in command of the colony?"

"Officially, or unofficially?" Joe asked.

"Well, both. I wasn't aware there were two such designations."

Joe measured his words carefully. "Officially the CO is Colonel Hathaway. But," he swerved into a narrow roadway leading to a tunnel, "I am the unofficial mayor of Luna City."

Dr. Lufkin and Cindy glanced at one another in surprise.

"The men come to me with their problems," Joe added with pride.

"Well, I think that's wonderful," Dr. Lufkin said finally. "I'm curious though. What is your job specification?"

"Me?" said Joe, with a touch of indignation that such a question should ever be asked. Would anyone have asked Ali Khan, or Roosevelt, or Winston Churchill, or Julius Caesar about their job specifications? "I'm the cook!" Just then, the lunarmobile hit a small bump and they sailed over the top of it as if they'd had wings.

Luna City, when they finally reached it, turned out to be a village of balloon-like domes clustered in a crevasse. It was explained that this location protected the double-layered polaroid glass roofs from falling meteors. The domes were connected by tunnels that looked something like papier-mâché models only, of course, they were large and extremely strong. "A lot of our stuff is underground in caves and tunnels," Joe explained. "We get bombarded with atomic fragments caused by solar and cosmic storms."

"Like the old-fashioned storm cellars on earth," Dr. Lufkin pointed out. "But you wouldn't remember them, Cindy."

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "Seems to me dad's still got one in the back yard." She stopped herself, realizing she had better not think about dad and home at a time like this. She would maintain a professional attitude at all times.

"We live underground mostly because we get more even temperatures," Joe explained further. "Topside they range from 250 degrees Fahrenheit above zero in the sun to 215 degrees Fahrenheit below, in the shade. We got a nuclear reactor installed in that crater over there," he pointed. "And the power is cabled to our distribution center."

Dr. Lufkin smiled. "For a cook, you're a pretty well informed guy."

Joe shrugged modestly. "I've got to be. Being mayor is a pretty big job."

Now as Cindy stood in the air lock chamber with its decontamination system that would keep dangerous radiation from invading the buildings, she found herself becoming intensely impatient with the long wait. It probably wasn't more than a few minutes; yet after the conversation with Joe, she was just plain curious about the colony itself.

However, she knew she must keep this feeling buried. It would be highly unprofessional to stare or give the impression that she was curious. From the beginning of her career, she had learned to mask her personal emotions when caring for patients. Surely the same technique would work now. Just act calm, cool, collected, and capable . . . as though this were a perfectly normal situation.

There were two air locks. One was designed as a waiting room and when she turned her head, she could see Dr. Lufkin, Joe, Turk, and the others through the window as they awaited their turns. She was sorry to hold them up, but as Joe had put it, it was "ladies first."

She turned back to see the other window, now chock-full of faces staring out at her. It reminded her of a football huddle or something. How could one be expected to maintain a professional pose in the face of that? She waved a gloved hand and then bit her lip to keep from laughing as they scattered like minnows when a man, apparently the CO, appeared. Good grief, what a face! He was unshaven, sleepy eyed and his hair hung in ragged hunks over his ears and across his forehead. It looked as though he had on an undershirt but Cindy couldn't be sure.

He turned away, and there appeared to be a good deal of shouting and confusion. The window was bare for a moment. When he reappeared his hair was pushed back out of his face, and he had on a uniform coat. He was wide awake now and seemed to be very angry. "You may come in now," he snarled into the radio.

She took a deep breath and began putting one foot ahead of the other. The door opened, then closed behind her. Immediately two men began unsnapping and unhooking her equipment. "Careful, don't hurt her, you big ox," somebody said. At last the heavy helmet was lifted off. "Look. She's got red hair . . . she looks like the pictures that were radioed up here . . . hey, somebody get a chair for the lady . . ." After the observations, came the questions. "How was the trip . . . are there any more at home like you . . . are you staying for Christmas . . .?" Finally someone said, "May I have this dance?"

Cindy held up her hand and laughed. "Hold it, fellas. Hold it. Let's take the questions one a time."

A short slender man, obviously of Japanese ancestry, stepped forward. "My name is Hiro," he said. "And I will perform the introductions."

As each man stepped forward to shake hands and welcome her to Luna City, Cindy was impressed by the neat uniforms, clean shaves, and good haircuts of everyone. Well, with the exception of the CO anyway. But where was he? She looked around. He had vanished. "I hate to say this but," she smiled, "will you take me to your leader? He will need to have a copy of my orders."

Hiro smiled slyly. "I believe he is tending to his personal ablutions. You see, he had not been apprised of your arrival time."

"Why, that's strange," Cindy said. "I should think . . ." she stopped herself, remembering her vow that she would not be curious or pry into business that did not concern her. "I am anxious to see the patients," she said, quickly changing the subject. She turned to the med tech. "I understand you've done a grand job."

He was a fine looking, young blond fellow but he appeared to be exhausted. "I've tried to do my best until you got here," he told her. "But all three of them need hospitalization. It'll be a relief to see them take off earthside." He stifled a yawn of fatigue. "I just gave them shots so they're asleep now."

Cindy stood up with surprisingly little effort. She was grateful for the bonus lift the moon's low gravity offered because, if this were earth, she'd be dead tired. As it was, she was simply tired mentally and emotionally from all the excitement and new experiences. She realized she desperately needed to be completely alone if only for five minutes.

The men seemed to read her thoughts because she now found herself being escorted across the room towards the quarters they'd prepared for her.

They stopped dead still as a loud blast from the radio echoed through the room. "Hey you looneys in there." It was Turk's voice and it sounded purple. "If it's not asking too much, how about tearing yourselves away from the party long enough to unlock this door? It's getting cold out here."

"Oops," Hiro said as he hurried over to push the air lock buzzer. "I am afraid we neglected to remember our other distinguished guests."

# 8

Her room was small and certainly not what she would call cozy. There were no windows, pretty curtains, or fuzzy rugs on the floor and there were no figurines or knickknacks to brighten the austere walls. She sniffed. Yes, some kind soul or souls had painted the room, probably just for her because the color was a rather sickening candy pink. A door for privacy had been hastily put up and she was grateful now to close it. There was a chest of drawers made of some strange material. Could it be pressed lava? But the cot with its foam rubber mattress was strictly earthside and the lamp over it, probably powered by the nearby nuclear reactor, looked like a dime store special. It had taken years and years, trips and trips to accumulate even the barest necessities for the selenauts' existence here, and far be it for her to make any complaint about the setup. Besides, comparing her lunar mission with the World War II and Korean Conflict missions of her predecessor flight nurses, this was really quite nice.

Oh, to get out of the stuffy space suit after all this time. She almost felt as if she had been born in it. And to get rid of those unpleasant sensor devises on her skin would be sheer heaven. She sank down on the cot, wiggled her bare toes, and sighed happily. It would be kind of nice to take a short nap but this would not be possible until the patients had been checked. She wondered what time it was, then decided time didn't really matter. She would simply fit herself into the routine here: eating, working, sleeping according to the work sheet. First things would come first, she vowed, and number one was a shower.

But no. This was not possible. From her classwork back on earth she remembered that water here was literally worth its weight in gold. Since there were no rivers, streams, or rain, vital water was obtained by cooking certain kinds of rocks. A mirror focused the sun's heat to 1,500 degrees Centigrade. This heat was then directed on a huge pan in which the rocks were placed. When the water in the rocks got hot enough, it rose in the form of steam. A dome caught the steam, let it condense and drip off as usable water. Through the years, enough water had been collected so that it was no longer a life and death matter. Every drop of waste and wash water was saved and run through the purification system so that it could be reused.

Perhaps she could bathe out of a helmet the way the Army and Air Force nurses had done during the war. Unfortunately, she didn't have a helmet. Wait! What was that strange looking object in the corner? It looked like a metal jet pod of some sort that had been sawed in half. Propped up on four flat lava stones, it resembled an old-fashioned . . . washbasin! Those wonderful men had rigged this up just for her, knowing she would need this soothing therapy after the long, long trip. On the floor beside it were several pitchers of water, some steaming hot, others cool. Neatly folded over the edge of the basin were several disposable towels with the word "guest" hand scrawled across the tops.

She swallowed the tight lump of gratitude in her throat as she climbed out of her heavy suit and hung it in the closet. Imagine ever thinking men were mean and horrid! For the hundredth time since the day of her launching, she blessed her stars for their friendship and encouragement. Of course, there were a few obstacles such as General Craig but, if things continued to go along successfully, perhaps he would change his mind about women in space. And dad, would he ever be proud and understand her love for aerospace medicine?

She poured the pitchers of water into the basin, then emptied an entire capsule of Perma-Perf bubble bath into it. The suds were luxurious, the fragrance heavenly. She sighed with delight as she began washing her faec.

Turk Hunter was a problem of a different sort. She hoped he would not embarrass or tease her in front of the selenauts. His nose was out of joint, she could tell. He probably never had so much competition in his life. Well, she smiled to herself, maybe this would take some of the wind out of his sails.

After drying herself thoroughly, she poured the water into the hastily rigged collection pipe. Then she opened her bag and took out fresh disposable undies and a pair of clean slacks. She thought a moment. What a horrid mistake that would be. She folded the slacks, put them away, and took out her crisp white nurse's uniform and the perky cap. Yes, that was more like it. White hose and white shoes . . . she looked into the mirror and applied fresh lipstick on her lips.

Ready? Not quite. A bit of perfume and a final smoothing of her fluffy hair. Okay, Cindy, off we go.

Dr. Lufkin, clad in his white doctor's coat, was seated beside the first patient's bed when she entered the sick bay. The familiar stethoscope protruded from his ears. He nodded his wordless instructions. She shook her thermometer down and placed it between the first patient's lips. While waiting, she took his pulse. She jotted down her notes on the patient's chart. Temperature and pulse—normal. But she saw by Dr. Lufkin's nearly illegible scrawl that the man had a fractured shoulder and was suffering from amnesia caused by the fall. His name was Dr. Reed, and he was an astrophysicist originally from New York City. He stared at her hard. She smiled her understanding.

"Surprised to see me?"

"Yes and no." The heavy dark eyebrows pulled together in a frown. "They keep telling me I'm on the moon, but the last I remember I was having coffee in a drug store in New York. Now that I see you, I'm beginning to wonder who's crazy. Me or them?"

"I wouldn't worry," she said. "You are on the moon; you had a nasty fall from a cliff. Your memory will return but it may take time."

It was obvious he couldn't believe his eyes or ears. "I still think you look like New York. You wouldn't kid me, would you?"

She held up her hand. "Scout's honor."

Dr. Lufkin took her aside. "Cindy, we're going to immobilize the fracture area with a styrofoam cast. The med tech can help me on that. Then it's up to you to turn on the TLC —tender loving care."

"Yes, doctor." As well as she knew him, she would never dream of calling him Peter. Together they turned to the next patient.

"What is his diagnosis?" she whispered.

The doctor shook his head. "I'm not sure. Partly shock, I suppose, but he is complaining of gastrointestinal pain. I've given him a radio-transmitter pill so we ought to have word soon."

Cindy knew the pill had a resonant circuit in which the capacitor was formed by a pressure-sensing transducer. Dr. Lufkin had placed an external antenna over the patient. The energy received by the pill caused the resonant circuit to ring. She was not qualified to interpret these results, but she hoped and prayed that they were good. She glanced at the man's chart and gasped. Why, it was the famous cell physiologist from the University of California, Dr. Tsing.

"How do you do, doctor?" she said. "I am your nurse, Lieutenant McGee."

The young Chinese blinked his pleasure. "Well, good morning or good evening or whatever it is. I have heard of angels with silver wings but I had not realized they were coming equipped with rockets these days."

Dr. Reed in the next bed shared the joke. "I think I'll write a thesis on rockets and bedpans for *Science-Fiction Weekly*. It will start out with the fantastic question: 'Guess who I saw on my way to the office—on the moon?' "

"Save your typewriter ribbon," Dr. Tsing advised. "It is too implausible."

"Now just a cotton-pickin' minute," Cindy laughed, pleased at the excellent morale of her patients. "A lot of things have been happening around the old homestead since you've been away. Why, I'll have you know that women . . ." her voice trailed off as she caught sight of Dr. Lufkin motioning her over to see the third patient. "I'll see you later. Don't go 'way."

Now as she bent over the heavily sedated Dr. Zizak, she was alarmed to see the condition of the fractured leg. It was bluish red in color and obviously bordering on gangrene, although the med tech had painted the abrasions and lacerations with bacteriostatic agents. He was not a young man as were the other two. His chart indicated he was forty, which for a selenaut was getting up there. Dr. Lufkin shook his head. "I don't know, Cindy. I would prefer operating under better conditions than these." He jerked his head, indicating his disapproval of the primitive sick bay. With the cots shoved together in a room not much larger than a closet, the whole setup was so jury-rigged it was pathetic. To operate here would be something like field hospital conditions during wartime. The risks would be high . . . too high for comfort.

"It doesn't look good," she said honestly.

Dr. Lufkin made his decision. "We'll watch him for the next twenty-four to thirty-six hours. If all goes well, we'll take him back as is. If not, we'll have to take the leg off." Together, they walked to the door of the sick bay and discussed the problems further.

"We'll switch from codeine to L-K-L as a painkiller. It's about seven times more effective and is nonhabit forming."

Cindy noted this on the chart. "He looks dehydrated," she said. "Shall I start him on intravenous feedings?"

"Yes. As soon as possible." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Now, about the others. What we've got to remember is that these men have been completely immobilized for days —under conditions of one-sixth of earth's gravity. Their entire cardio-vasular systems, their muscles, everything, have been relaxed to the danger point." He shook his head. "How are we going to get them in shape for the trip?"

She frowned thoughtfully. "Ordinarily, I suppose people here have to work out in the gym to prevent this kind of breakdown. But how can we expect injured patients to exercise?" She glanced at the gaunt faces of the men, at their bodies swathed in white sheets. She knew that if they did not receive some form of physical therapy between now and the time they blasted off, it would be like telling them to get out of bed and play a rough game of football. "I'll do my best, doctor. Perhaps if I work on the unaffected areas . . ."

"That's right," he said. "We'll try to rig up a pulley system for Dr. Zizak to exercise his arms and shoulders as soon as he comes out of heavy sedation."

"Squeezing rubber balls would help," she offered. "And massage."

"I'm going to see if we can't round up some deep-space suits," he told her. Then seeing her blank look, explained, "They've got an edge over the ones we've been wearing in that they use the old Boy Scout tourniquet technique. They've got pressure cuffs built into the arms and legs that apply pressure to the extremities, to fool the blood circulating system into thinking gravity has been applied."

This sounded good to Cindy. "And with exercise plus protective orlon cocoons, we might just make it." She thought a moment. "What about their superficial wounds and lacerations? Will there be any dressings to change?"

He held up his hand. "No problem, Cindy. The med tech took care of all such matters."

"Will there be any need for transfusions?"

"Negative, unless it's a life or death matter. Luna City doesn't have a blood bank, and this will be one of my recommendations when I get back. I am also recommending the med tech for an Aerospace medal for unusual bravery and devotion to duty. He was on the team that performed the rescue. His medical care was right on the button. Why he . . ." Dr. Lufkin's face suddenly reddened as he saw Cindy's frown and narrowed eyes.

"I had no idea there was such a well-trained med tech up here," she said slowly.

He looked away, innocently. "It's just as well."

"You *could* have told me," she persisted.

"Yes."

She posed her next question, and now she wanted an honest answer. "Doctor, I was given to believe that only I could handle this job because of weight, training, and so on. Now, I see that with the exception of a bit of physical therapy and I suppose the old-fashioned nursing chores, that you could do very well without me."

"An emergency could arise," he said.

"Yes, sir. But," she tried to keep her voice steady and, at the same time, low in tone. "What I really want to know is, was this trip necessary?"

Dr. Lufkin didn't say a word. He simply spread out his palm and moved it in an arc. Her gaze followed his gesture until it rested on the patients. She had met and talked with them, but this time she looked at them closely and listened to the intuition . . . or sensitiveness within her. Luckily they had not heard her questioning comments; there was a wonderful glow of trust in their eyes. It was as if they could not believe that they had once been afraid. Why, they weren't moaning or grimacing in pain, although she knew they were uncomfortable. Wordlessly they told her of their gratitude for the comfort she brought. There was also another little matter that had to do with pride. It was as old as the military nursing profession and it went something like ". . . if that skirted little frill isn't afraid, then I won't be. . . ." The med tech had done an outstanding job, as had his fellow-enlisted, medical personnel buddies through the years in peace and war, at every corner of the globe . . . and now, in space. But as highly trained and valorous as they'd always been, they were still men.

She smiled at Dr. Lufkin. "I think I understand and I'm glad the subject came up. I guess I got so involved acting the female astronaut that I forgot about the important things."

"But that's just the point," he said. "If you're going to be a space nurse, you've got to get out and see what the actual conditions are. You've got to know the problems, live the life, see for yourself what your patients back at the Aerospace Medical Center go through. Sure you've got to be a female astronaut of sorts. I'm depending on you to absorb every scrap of information possible from the female angle . . . physical, psychological, morale—the works."

There was a long pause while she digested her friend's frank confession. Finally she told him in a rare burst of unprofessional kidding that his theories were sound. "But doctor," she added, "believe me, I'm shocked at your tactics in putting across your women-in-space campaign."

He shrugged pleasantly. "As the good German doctor said many years ago when the Americans were belittling the crude-looking interior of the Russian spaceship, '. . . *Ja.* But it verked.' "

## 9

It was a wonderful day, truly exciting, although it had nothing to do with the weather, since there was no such thing. Imagine old-fashioned nursing, pure and simple, and of all places—on the moon! Sheets to change (mitering the corners just so), back rubs, exercises, thermometers, blood pressures, plumping pillows, adjusting positions, vitamins, aspirin, reading aloud, kidding around . . . but most of all, just being *there.* She had some minor difficulty giving the intravenous feeding to Dr. Zizak. At low gravity, the fluid would not flow down through the rubber tubing and into the vein. She solved this problem by fashioning a spring tension device that would maintain pressure on the plastic bottle. It required careful watching, since the intravenous fluid simply *had* to be injected at the proper rate.

Yes, in many ways, her nursing day was pretty odd; yet she sensed the amazing improvement, not only of her patients but in the morale within the entire compound.

She was stuffing the soiled linen into the electric vibrator known as the lunar laundromat which was just outside the sick bay door, when Joe stalked up carrying a plate of strange looking food. "Thought you'd like to have this, since you won't be wantin' to leave your patients."

"Well, thanks so much but," she moved the back of her hand across her perspiring forehead, "I rather thought I'd eat in the mess hall with the boys. The patients are all napping at the moment." She hadn't paid too much attention to Joe's appearance and now she was startled at his huge size. It must have cost a fortune to put that two hundred and fifty pounder in orbit. Of course, he may have fattened up a bit on his moon duty. How long had she heard he'd been there? Nearly a year. That was quite a spell. "The snail broth and tomato salad you sent in for the patients went over big," she said. "They really wolfed it down."

"I try to do my best." His curly, graying-red hair bristled surprisingly as he set his thick lips in a firm line. "Although some people don't appreciate it."

She took the plate of food and bravely dug the fork into a green concoction. She tasted, chewed, and forced a smile of appreciation. "This is delicious, Joe. You know everybody appreciates you. Besides," she made herself take another bite, "you are the mayor here, as I remember."

"That's right. I was until . . ." he looked away. She noticed his thick hands clenching and unclenching. His chest rose excitedly beneath the white apron.

"Until what, Joe?" she asked.

"Oh, never mind." He flapped his arms dejectedly. "Skip it." He whirled around and disappeared into the kitchen.

Well now, that's odd, she thought. He'd had such a definite change in personality from the time they'd first met that he seemed like a different person. Perhaps she should ask . . . but no, that was not her province. Let local politics alone, was her firm resolution.

The men, when she finally joined the group, couldn't do enough for her. There were chairs offered, art work to be seen, and soil samples to be viewed—admiringly of course. Even bags of fascinating moon gases collected under precarious conditions had to be admired and praised. Someone offered to show her the view through the retractable periscope and, of course, everyone had problems, "sort of personal," they wanted to discuss. Somewhere in the background, Turk fretted, muttered, and silently fumed as she was whisked by on her queenly carpet. "Next time I take a female to the moon, remind me to bring along the male-repellant bomb."

She would have *liked* sitting around talking with Turk about life; rhyming words like earth and mirth and, as a matter of fact, learning about what made that crazy astronaut tick. But business and her professional duties came first.

There was for instance the Cook's tour, and this had nothing to do with Joe. It included the gymnasium where Hiro performed with his judo students, and the hydroponics farm where the food was grown in tanks of water. She was not surprised to see the algae colonies; it was well-known that the green slime absorbed light and carbon dioxide while giving off oxygen and providing edible bulk. But she was a little amazed at the strange bedfellow-plants sharing the same nutrient solution. One tank held corn and potatoes; in another were potatoes and tomatoes. The botanist on duty explained the problems of soilless gardening on the moon.

"With a two-week, day-night cycle, we had trouble growing plants requiring high photosynthetic activity. We finally got around it by using a system of mirrors during the 'day' and artifiicial light at 'night.' " He waved an arm. "As you see, we lean towards green leafy plants, because they give off oxygen. Here," he plucked a bright red strawberry from the vine and handed it to her proudly. "Live it up."

"M—m, m, delicious."

She noticed certain plants seemed to be suspended in the air, with their bare roots appearing to be quite healthy. He explained further. "This is a new technique made necessary by the low gravity. We found the nutrient solution was creeping to the upper parts of the roots of some plants so we decided to spray the hair roots with the nutrient solution and call it 'aeroponics.'

"The big problem, of course, is to maintain just the right balance. Some plants don't need much light, but grow slowly. Others really take off, once they've been given a hormone booster and some filtered sunlight."

Cindy smiled. "You make these plants seem as though they have real personalities."

"They have!" he said firmly. "Why, I can almost tell what they're thinking, especially when feeding time rolls around." He glanced fondly at a horrible looking mess of goop. "Those are the real workhorses though."

Cindy tried not to make a face when she asked what it was.

"Bacteria, fungi, and algae."

Alongside the tanks was the underground farm where chanticleer, fresh from earth was strutting about, establishing his kingly position amongst the lunar hens. There were rabbits and other small animals, a fine looking colony of snails, and a vat containing fresh, lively fish.

A buzzer sounded, interrupting the fascinating tour. "That means it's evening chow time," the botanist told her.

She gasped. "I've got to feed my patients and tuck them in for the night. It's so confusing not having the sun come up and go down as it does at home.

As she went about her tasks—temperatures, pulses, blood pressures, exercising weakened limbs, easing apprehension, straightening bed linen, helping with their meals—she realized she would sleep very soundly when she finally got to bed. It would be a bone-tired sleep, but a happy one.

She picked up the extra tray of food Joe had sent in. Of course, it was too late to join the others in the mess hall. That would come another time. Besides, she had a lot of thinking to do.

She would not be honest if she did not admit that things had gone very well indeed. Dr. Lufkin was so right in his finagling scheme to get a woman into space at long last. Her contributions had been unique and far-reaching. Yes, Dr. Lukfin was proud, and she was sure when she got back to earth, the entire nursing profession would be proud, too. But, she promised herself she would not appear to be smug or anything. Just sort of shrug and say, "It was a breeze, girls," or maybe tell how exciting it was. . . .

There was one more item she definitely wanted cleared up before she turned in, and that was Colonel Hathaway, the CO. Now that she had her feet on the ground, figuratively speaking, she would pay him a call and see if there was anything she could do to help the poor man. All she had to go on for diagnosis was a vague sense of uneasiness within herself, and the sly whispered mutterings amongst the men. Perhaps if he talked it out with her, since she was a woman and outside his command, he would feel better.

As she anticipated, he was quite alone in his office. "May I come in?" she asked.

"Sure."

He was she guessed, in his forties, now clean shaven with his hair cut and combed and his blue uniform neat as a pin. There was nothing outstanding in his appearance; in fact, he would have made an excellent spy because he could disappear in a crowd without being noticed. Yet, he hadn't been given command of Luna City without excellent qualifications and a spotless security record. Of that, Cindy was certain.

"May I sit down?"

"Be my guest." He swiveled himself around and faced the wall. She watched the muscles in the back of his neck as he spoke. "The men have arranged a staff party in your honor. You're going to be late if . . . if you hang around here."

"I didn't know about any party."

"It's a surprise. They had to ask my permission. I gave it." His voice was unemotional; his back, still turned from her. She wished she could see the expression, if any, on his face.

She cleared her throat, took a deep breath, and plunged in. It was now or never. "Sir, I feel that, as a nurse, I should understand as much of the terminology here in Luna City as possible. Since you are the Commanding Officer, perhaps you will explain or translate for me."

She watched him fold his hands across his stomach. He leaned back and put his feet up. "What do you want to know?"

"What do the terms 'long eye' and 'big eye' mean?"

There was a long, unearthly, unmoonly silence. He reached for a strip of radio tape and began twisting it nervously in his fingers. Finally he said, "The 'big eye' is as old as mankind. It's as old as gossip, jealousy, and hate. It's also as old as stupidity. It's . . ." he still didn't turn to her, "it's when a group of people give a single individual the hate or silent treatment."

Cindy probed, "It would be pretty bad in an isolated situation such as Luna City for instance."

"Yes, but it has happened in submarines in mismatched crews, in spacecraft, in Spanish explorers' crews, in isolated colonies in the earth's tropics, and in Antarctica. It's happened in small towns and in suburbia even . . ."

"You are quite a student of people and philosophy," she offered guardedly.

"Yes, I have lots of time for that nowadays."

"How do you suppose the 'big eye' ever gets started?" she asked, still keeping the conversation on a theoretical basis.

He took a deep breath and thought for a while. "Stupidity," he said at last. "Or maybe thoughtlessness, naïveness, overzealousness; it's hard to say how an individual can get caught in such a bind. Being the least bit different from the crowd is asking for the 'big eye.' That much I know," then he quickly added, "from research, that is."

"And how does the person react who has gotten the 'big eye'?" she asked. "Does he change, conform, mend his ways and so on?"

"It depends."

She was startled to see him swing around now and face her across the desk. "It depends on whether or not the victim was right or wrong, justly or unjustly accused. And it also depends on a small word I don't like to use in front of a lady, but the definition is intestinal fortitude." His gray eyes lit up for the first time. "It depends on whether or not he wants to make a stand for whatever he believes."

She looked at her folded hands. "And the 'long eye'?"

She realized immediately she should not have asked that. He turned away from her and there was another long silence. "The 'long eye' means a man has a ten-foot stare in an eight-foot room."

Cindy knew she should give up; she should leave this moody man and go on to the others who were waiting for her. She was getting nowhere fast, since he was not going to level with her at all.

She was startled to hear him say, "A man can get into trouble if he does not adjust to unusual situations. A military person must realize that one duty station is not the same as another. He does not have his wife and children with him, and he must not dwell on that aspect. Above all he must not . . ." there was a strange expression crossing his face, a kind of return to life, "he must not monopolize radio-earth so that others cannot talk with their families, also."

So that was it. Well, nurse Cindy McGee, say something and it had better be *right!*

She stood up smoothing her wrinkled uniform with her hands which were perspiring because of her tenseness over the conversation. "I would like to have a few minutes to freshen up. It would be a big relief to me if you would escort me to the party since . . . (heavens! how ridiculous can you be?) since I am all alone."

# 10

The sounds of male voices singing "Jingle Bells" echoed through the tunnel as Cindy and Colonel Hathaway made their way toward the colony's recreation room. Since she was technically off duty, she had removed her cap and clipped a small sprig of artificial holly in her hair. She hoped the festive touch would meet with everyone's approval. But more than that, she hoped the unpleasant "big eye" given the CO would be a thing of the past, now that he had realized his mistakes. Several times in her nursing career she had found herself in the position of mediator between fellow workers when differences arose. It was one of the most satisfying feelings in the world to see people shake hands and make up.

Of course, things were different here on the moon. Very different. But those involved were still people, she reasoned. Selenauts, astronauts, looneys or whatever, they were as human as anyone else. Yet, as she and the CO stood in the room's entrance and saw the surprised faces of all the men, she wondered if her little scheme might not backfire on her. The singing voices faded away into silence until only the tape recording remained. In a moment, that, too, was switched off.

She took a deep breath. "Merry early-Christmas everybody. My, you've got the place all fixed up." Her eyes swept over the room that was decorated with red and green radio tape. The feeble attempts to make something out of nothing touched her deeply. Even the metal pole with its dangling coils could, with effort, be called a tree. "It's beautiful."

She was unprepared for the complete lack of response to her enthusiasm. The group, to a man, stared past her at the CO. Joe, entering the room carrying a platter of green algae cookies, stopped and frowned his surprise. Talk about the stillness of space . . . this was far worse. Her mind whirled in sudden confusion and disappointment. Had she gone too far and been overconfident of her abilities, because everything had worked out so well thus far? Was it going to be spoiled now? Was she just a meddlesome, female busybody? The look of scorn on Joe's face told her yes.

Several of the men began moving around, shuffling their feet with discomfort. "I suddenly remember I've got work to do," someone said.

"Yeah. So have I."

*No, you can't leave,* she wanted to shout. Her glance passed to Turk who had just entered the room. Oh, surely he understood! He was her friend, or at least he had been interested in her welfare. But she had almost totally ignored him since their arrival. His face was serious for a change, as though he were trying to comprehend the situation. She was startled by the voice beside her.

"In view of the present, unusual circumstances, I have made out a new directive." Cindy watched tensely as the CO handed a paper to the sergeant nearby. "Post this on the bulletin board." He addressed the men again. "The directive states that we will operate on a holiday routine in order to allow each man his allotted time with radio-earth. Families and friends listed in your files have been alerted as to when your calls will come through." He cleared his throat. Cindy saw his face redden a bit.

"And a Merry Christmas to all of you."

In the silence that followed, someone said "Huh?"

The CO frowned, then reverted to character. "Huh, what?"

"Huh, *sir.*"

"That's better. Now on with the party."

Cindy could have cried with joy as Turk swung into the act by putting on the tape again. It had to be fast because timing was all-important at this stage. A long-standing gripe doesn't disappear immediately. The "old man" would still be suspect, in spite of his obvious change of heart unless . . .

"Come on, everybody, let's have a song." Turk was leading, waving his arms like the conductor of a symphony.

"Christmas on the moon
is coming soon
Joy is everywhere
tho there's no air"

Cindy laughed out loud as the song continued.

"Cindy's happy face
will grace
Our party here in outer space."

There was dancing, too, when someone dragged in a sheet of magnetic metal, along with weighted shoes. Of course, it wasn't exactly lively dancing as she moved about in the oversized clodhoppers but her partners never complained. Eventually she found herself collapsing on the bench alongside Turk. "Whew, I'm beat," she said, realizing her cheeks were flushed. "I've never been to such a crazy party in my life. And I've never laughed so hard. Everything people say sounds so funny."

"I know," he said, the corner of his mouth turning up ever so slightly.

She had come to recognize this expression as having a double meaning. "How do you know? You haven't even asked me to dance."

"I was busy."

"Doing what, might I ask? Sulking because here's one female who isn't swooning over your charms?"

He raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips in thought. Then he shrugged. "Here, have a cooky."

"Thanks." She obediently munched the sweet-flavored, hard, green thing and swallowed it with effort. Then remembering his past kindnesses, said, "I really do like you, very much."

"Of course. It's obvious."

She stamped her foot on his toe. "Honestly, Turk, I don't understand you at all. Sometimes you seem almost intelligent; other times I could brain you."

"Better not unless you want to drive home alone."

"That's blackmail and I won't have it! I just won't have it!" She sat in silence and fumed. Finally she said, "I should think you would start giving me credit for the job I've done here. If you would just treat me with respect and dignity . . . and stuff. You know?"

"Looks to me like you're giving yourself enough credit without adding mine to the long list."

Her eyes flashed. "Are you suggesting I'm conceited?"

"Let's call it overconfidence," he said calmly. "In fact, you're bordering on getting a swelled head over this whole thing."

"B-But that's not true," she protested. "I was brave and I did something no other woman has done before. I've worked hard and done my best and . . . and . . ."

He held up his hand. "True, Cindy. But you can't sit back now and take your bows. This is a pretty complicated life you've entered. You have to be alert all the time. You've just managed to patch up the local quarrels here so that everything is sweetness and light and intense contentment." He paused. "Or is it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Look over there."

It was Joe standing all alone. He had a dish of small sandwiches in his hand. No one was talking to him. Finally he walked across the room, put the dish on the table and sat down to talk with Hiro. "There goes the ex-mayor of Luna City," Turk said. "And right now, I'll bet he's saying the CO will rescind the directive after you leave."

"Why, that's ridiculous!"

"Maybe. But if I were you, I'd pay a little attention to Joe. You know, spread the charms around to *all* the troops."

She put her hands on her hips haughtily. "Well thanks. Thanks a lot. It must be wonderful to be so wise . . ."

"It is," he agreed.

She started to get up and leave this aggravating conversation. Here was Turk calling her down, right in the midst of her triumph. "I'm not going to sit here with a party pooper like you any longer," she said. "Other people enjoy my company. Thanks for the free advice."

She turned. Her eyes widened with surprise. What had happened to the party during her conversation with Turk? The loud laughter, the jigging around, the singing had stopped. Now the men were divided into groups, telling tall tales or listening to the tape recordings of Christmas music. Why, the place was like a stuffy Sunday night at a men's club. "See?" she said triumphantly. "When I was out there circulating around, the fellows had fun . . ."

Turk stood up beside her and directed her gaze to the pet parakeet's cage in the corner. She had not noticed the bird's presence before this. She gasped when she saw the bird lying perfectly still. Turk put his hand on her arm. "Don't say anything. It will revive."

Her mind whirled with questions. "But how . . . what . . . ?" She suddenly remembered from training, "oxygen."

He nodded. "We were all hypoxic. With all the dancing, singing, and excitement . . . the system wasn't set for that kind of activity."

"And you, of course, slipped out to adjust the valves?"

"I said that I was busy, didn't I?"

She let her breath out slowly as she realized what a close brush with serious injury, maybe death, they'd had. The men, of course, were so intrigued with her presence, plus the return of Colonel Hathaway to the gang, that they'd neglected to watch for changes in breathing activities. Cindy was deflated and downright embarrassed that she'd taken personal credit for the exhilarating atmosphere. Yet she vowed she would not come down from her lovely cloud nine. Oh dear, there she went with her earth thoughts again.

"All right," she said firmly. "I'll cry uncle. You win. But let's wind up the party with a small round of Merry Christmas spirit, before I hit the sack. Frankly, I'm pooped."

Turk grinned. "I'm with you, Cindy. Now, what do you think about Joe? Don't you think you ought to pay a mess call and compliment him on his cooking, administrative ability, or something?"

"Tomorrow," she said. "I really will for sure."

Cindy watched Turk as he entered the center of the room and took over, just as a master of ceremonies would have done. She reluctantly admitted that all astronauts had to possess certain superior qualities of character, humor, good sense, intelligence and as Turk had said "have extreme poise in unusual situations." There was no point in her getting carried away, however. Just get that dreamy astronaut back on earth at the officer's club—and oh, brother—he'd be his same old spoiled self.

She wondered why she had her "back up" about Turk. Certainly she'd had plenty of dates with all kinds of fellows. There were pilots, weathermen, scientists, interns, and even occasional civilians, bless their souls. Yet, she realized, it was always on a crowd basis. People would invite friends to the nurses' quarters for dinner and they'd end up dancing someplace afterward or climb into someone's car and take off for the beach. It wasn't that Cindy couldn't feel romantic toward the fellows. Lots of them were attractive, and certainly she was never a wallflower at the local festivities. Still, she realized, she was not a *femme fatale,* with a string of beaux a mile long. And she could never be a Rosalind. No, she was strictly a one-man dog, and if she ever made up her mind and heart about a certain person, that would be it.

Could Turk be the one? Her better sense told her *never* yet, there he was, proposing a toast to the fairest flower this side of the green hills of earth.

She stood quite still, her eyes misting with sentiment over the tender gesture. Her hands, clasped in front, twisted the tiny lace handkerchief. Never in her life had she won a trophy, or won a bowling prize, or done anything spectacular. It just wasn't her lot to be outstanding, and now, here were the men of Luna City toasting her health with the precious water, locally referred to as moonshine.

"To Cindy," they cried in unison. It was like the Knights of the Round Table in the days of chivalry. She smiled her prettiest and winked her thanks to Turk for the lovely compliment after their verbal duel. The men clinked their glasses and drank . . . and then . . . and then . . .

It all came back with a great sound of *Poooooooo* as soapy water sprayed in all directions. They were coughing, clutching their throats, swearing, muttering, and heaven knows what. Someone yelled for Joe, who came running with a fresh keg of water. "What the heck happened?" Another man called. "This stuff tastes like bath water!"

All eyes were on Cindy. She was the only person in Luna City history who had ever been provided with the luxury of a private washbasin. Invisible fingers pointed with shocked disbelief and scorn. She began backing away, shaking her head in confusion. "I don't understand . . . I don't see how this could have happened," she choked out.

"If only you had asked one of us for assistance," Hiro said quietly, "we could have shown you the proper means of disposing . . ."

"But I put it where it looked as if it should go."

Heads were shaking now, along with sighs of disgust. Someone muttered, "Dames!" Joe agreed. "Like I said, 'who needs 'em?' " He strutted away and returned with yet another keg of fresh water. "I got plenty more where that came from," he explained to the worried men. "We can hold out till the system is fixed."

There was a great sigh of relief, along with a chorus of "Good old Joe," but Cindy had already fled down the tunnel to her room. She slammed the door behind her, then leaned against it as tears welled in her eyes. Oh darn, darn, how could this terrible thing have happened?

She flung herself down on the bed and wept in anger and chagrin. This was all her fault. She was stupid and overconfident. She should never have left home. She wished she were dead. . . .

There was a knock at the door. "Cindy, let me in for a minute." It was Turk.

"Go away."

"Open the door."

"No. I want to be alone."

"If you don't open the door I'll break it down."

She snapped the latch, then backed away as he rushed past her. "Why aren't you laughing?" she screamed. "Why aren't you saying 'I told you so'?"

"Oh, be quiet." He knelt down to examine the pipe in the corner of the room where she had poured the water. "Okay. Where did you put it?"

"Put what? The water?" She pointed. "There."

He sighed impatiently. "I'm talking about the valve. You know, the little thing that goes in here?" He inserted a finger into the empty space. "Look, the boys inserted a temporary waste pipe in the plumbing system with a valve that would prevent the backflow of waste water into the fresh water side of the system. Did you touch anything down here?"

"No. I swear I didn't."

He fiddled a while longer, then stood up. "You may as well dry your eyes, Cindy. It wasn't your fault. Somebody, who knew what he was doing, removed the valve."

Here eyes widened. "But why would anybody do that?"

"To discredit you."

She blew her nose and turned her back. "But why . . . me?"

Even as she asked, she knew the answer. When somebody wants to discredit you, they are either evil, jealous, or fearful of their own security. Her mind flashed over the faces of the men. Who? Who would fit that description? The one person Turk had mentioned earlier was Joe Porter; but that seemed impossible. Joe was friendly . . . eager to help, or at least he had been. This just wasn't like Joe; and yet she found herself thinking of Mark Twain's words: Every man is like a moon, with a dark side he doesn't show to anybody. . . .

She turned to Turk. "What should I do now?"

His eyes were very serious. "Cindy, that's your decision."

Alone again, she took off her uniform and hung it up beside her space suit. She unclipped the sprig of plastic holly from her hair and laid it on the table. "Merry Christmas," she said. "Merry Merry."

Cindy switched off the bed lamp, closed her eyes and pretended it was night. But hard as she tried to relax in sleep, she could not get the nagging problem off her mind. There was no use postponing it until morning, either. She would have to face it now.

Joe Porter was not an evil man. This much her intuition told her, even as she wrestled with her resentment over the mean stunt he had pulled. So that left jealousy and fear as his motivation. Strange how he'd welcomed her, practically with open arms, when she arrived. He honestly wanted to share Luna City's problems with her and Dr. Lufkin. But soon he found himself shoved into the background. The men ignored Joe, the faithful cook, in favor of Cindy and even after she returned to earth, her activities would linger in the form of the change in the CO.

Joe had been here longer than anyone else and apparently had no desire to return to earth. Perhaps she reasoned, he probably never had fared so well earthside.

But, she mashed her fist into the pillow, why should I take the blame for something he did? I have my pride, my career, my reputation at stake.

She could tell all, and Turk would back her up. Joe would be thoroughly discredited and she could return to earth, triumphant. But what good would that do up here? She'd throw the whole system out of kilter at Luna City. Good cooks are hard to find; dedicated selenauts with enough scientific skill to cope with the complex life on the moon are even rarer. If Joe were booted out, just who would take his place?

She would have to face the problem squarely. She could have warded off this problem with Joe if she'd had good sense. She could have made him feel important, taken him into her confidence, asked his advice . . . in general, worked in a more cooperative manner instead of being so independent. Turk was right, much as she hated admitting it. This new space adventure she had entered was far more complicated than withstanding stresses, sitting tight, and barreling along. It was more than being physically and mentally qualified. It was more than being a nurse and a woman.

It was, she guessed, a matter of finding an extra something . . . a plus quality in one's native abilities, and then using it. Dr. Lufkin had expected this kind of judgment from her when he chose her for the task. He had asked her to explore the many facets of space life, and she had done so, albeit clumsily.

She turned over on her other side. A glimmer of something that felt like the truth struck her. What if she hadn't come here at all? What if she'd spent the rest of her life in an "intellectual deprivation chamber" back home? Because that is exactly as it seemed right now. She would know nothing of speed, space, the stars, and the moon. She'd coo gently over a patient who had psychological problems stemming from outer space duty without the slightest understanding of why or what!

It was ridiculous! It truly was. These people were just different from those living on earth. Their thoughts, their actions, their problems, their ailments were foreign to the snug, comfortable earth, and the people living on it.

Okay, so she got wounded in the attempt to find out what was going on by being a part of the group. She had learned. She would profit by her mistakes. From now on, she would study and learn everything possible, so that she could pass on valuable training information to the girls at home. As for the immediate medical tasks, she would pray for guidance and strength in carrying them out in a professional way.

She rolled over on her back and stared at the ceiling. It wouldn't be easy to face the fellows in the "morning." The Knights of the Round Table were probably still grumbling about their mixed-up moonshine. She suddenly smiled to herself there in the dark. In the months to come, this would probably be one of the funniest stories the old-time selenauts could tell. She could almost hear it . . . embroidered upon as it was told and retold during the long lunar nights: ". . . that nutty nurse who threw the whole place into a spin . . . let me tell you . . ." and so on.

She decided it was a twisted and indirect form of entertainment she had inadvertently provided. Talk about Joe having a dark side he never showed to anybody—what about her own dark side that she had just discovered? The ability to take a joke on herself, even though it wasn't intended to work out that way. And this little "plus" quality would be a big help to her from now on, wherever she happened to be, *if* she could profit from this incident. She silently sent a message to girls everywhere.

"I'm ashamed and sorry," she muttered into her pillow. "I may have disgraced you for the moment. But the show isn't over yet."

## 11

The low, persistent sound of a buzzer awakened Cindy from her deep sleep. She blinked, stretched, and yawned widely. Her first thoughts were earthy—what time was it? Then she remembered that time did not matter except in caring for her patients. Patients! She sat up in bed, seeing for the first time the emergency blinker light over her door.

She flicked the intercom switch. "This is Lieutenant McGee."

A masculine voice came back. "Report to sick bay at once."

"Roger." How quickly this expression had become a part of her daily vocabulary.

All personal problems were forgotten as she leaped out of bed and hurriedly dressed. Uniform, hose, shoes, cap. In no time at all she was beside Dr. Lufkin as he bent over the patient. Already help had come in the persons of Hiro and the med tech who moved the other two patients from the sick bay into another room alongside.

"Dr. Zizak. Is he . . .?"

Dr. Lufkin nodded. "We'll have to operate. He'll never make it if we don't."

Cindy noted the man's elevated temperature, the weeping ulcers that had begun to form on the discolored flesh, and the characteristic odor of this kind of infection. Pulse was ninety; blood pressure one-twenty over seventy. She glanced at his face and saw that it was a mask of shock and horror at what was about to happen. Something must be done to allay the pain and fear. "We'll use hypothermia," Dr. Lufkin said in a low voice. "Better give him three grains of nembutal intravenously now. Maybe he'll sleep through it."

Cindy located the sterile syringe and measured the medication. After tying the tourniquet around the man's arm, she injected the medication into his vein. She spoke softly to him, "We'll do everything possible to keep you comfortable and, at the same time, safe. Dr. Lufkin is one of our finest surgeons."

"But nurse," the man whispered. "I don't want to lose my leg. I don't want to be a cripple . . ." His words began to slur.

"You won't be a cripple for long." She rested her hand on his shoulder as he was wheeled into the center of the room under the bright cone of light. "That's why we're here. With proper care now and later en route to the earthside hospital, you will be in condition for a total leg transplant."

His eyes searched her face. "You are telling me the truth?"

"Yes, I promise you." A promise to a surgical patient was always tricky. Even with the most modern medical equipment, the finest hospital, and the most competent surgeon in the land, a promise of recovery could not always be fulfilled. Here in the primitive sick bay of Luna City, her promise was far more tenuous than any she'd made before. "You're going to have to be brave."

"I understand." He closed his eyes in a drugged twilight sleep. His lips formed the words, "Will you be here, nurse?"

"Yes. I'll stay right with you all the time."

Now that he was resting peacefully, she went into action. "Doctor, we'll need whole blood for a transfusion.

He was glancing through the microfilm medical records of the men aboard. "I'm way ahead of you. Type 'O' will do it. Where's a donor?"

Hiro stuck his head around the corner. "Here I am." He motioned to the med tech. "Come on. Bleed me before I chicken out."

Cindy hurried down the tunnel toward the kitchen. She was scarcely aware of the anxious selenauts standing around in groups or pacing the floor until one man spoke. "How is he, nurse?"

So, the word was out that something serious was going to happen! Should she explain? Yes, she decided, since Dr. Lufkin wasn't available, she should tell the men. These relationships were too close, too intimate to be handled impersonally, as they might be at home. They could never set foot outside the colony alone. They were completely dependent upon one another for their very lives. She spoke as she would to the worried members of a man's family.

"As you know, Dr. Zizak sustained a severe fracture just above the ankle joint, which severed the vessels supplying blood to the foot. By the time we arrived here, the foot was cold, pulseless, and cyanotic, which indicated a circulatory deficiency. Dr. Lufkin decided to wait and observe the patient's condition before planning a course of action."

She took a deep breath and continued. "In the past few hours, Dr. Zizak's temperature has become elevated, which indicates infection. The leg is beginning to show signs of gangrene."

Turk moved towards her. "Will he have to amputate?"

"Yes, and we will need your help . . . all of you. At least one more volunteer donor with type 'O' blood."

Several men responded immediately.

"And," she said evenly, "I will need water in which to sterilize instruments and for making ice cubes. The water purification system must be repaired. It is most urgent." There, she'd said it.

She held her breath as the CO strode into the room. "I heard that bit about the ice cubes. Joe's got some. I'll order him to . . ."

She blocked his way. "No thank you, sir. I'll *ask* for them." She caught sight of a small nod of approval from Turk as she swung around the corner and into the kitchen.

They faced each other squarely, or rather he looked down at her. "I heard what you said. Poor Zizak."

"He's taking it very well," she confided. "Especially now that he knows he has a chance for a leg transplant when he gets home."

Joe scratched his head in wonder. "Gee, I guess I've been here so long I've lost track of things. Where will the . . . the new leg come from?"

"The limb bank." She dared not rush this conversation. By now she'd discovered you sometimes save time by seeming to waste it. And Joe, if he were on her side, could very well save the day. She remembered her lessons in psychology but mostly she leaned on her womanly intuition as she explained, "People with healthy extremities will their limbs, just as many have willed their eyes. In fact, doctors can transplant just about everything except ears. There is a good chance Dr. Zizak will be as fit as ever—someday. That is, if we take the proper precautions now." She took a deep breath. "Joe, we've got work to do."

"We?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes. You and I."

"B-But I'm no doctor or nurse or anything like that." His eyes avoided hers. "No, ma'am. Count me out."

She resisted her impulse to stamp her foot impatiently.

"Without your special kind of help, the operation will fail." She waited a moment for that to sink into his thoughts. "A man will die!" Then she added for good measure, "Joe, a life is in your hands."

His face reddened as he wiped his hands on his apron. He scuffed his feet. "What kind of special help do you want?"

"I need water. And I need you to get it boiling so I can sterilize the instruments. I need detergents to scrub the surgical area. And I need ice cubes, all you can give me and more."

He blinked. "Ice cubes?"

"Yes," her voice rose in spite of her efforts to remain calm and diplomatic. "We are going to bring the temperature of the patient's leg to thirty degrees before the amputation. It is the safest method." She paused. "What do you say?"

He turned away and stared at the huge wall oven. Finally his hand reached into an apron pocket and pulled out a metal object that looked like a bolt or valve or something. He tossed it in the air twice, then turned to her. "You might give this to that astronaut Hunter fella. He seems pretty handy about fixing things."

She frowned. "What is it?"

His expression was noncommittal. "I dunno. I'm just the cook around here. I . . . I found it on the floor when I was cleaning. It might just work on the water system. Who knows?"

Cindy's heart thudded with relief. Without thinking, she threw her arms around his big neck and gave him a smack on the cheek. "Joe," she said sincerely. "You're a sweetheart."

She and the med tech prepped the leg by shaving and scrubbing it, near the incision area, with the precious detergent. She was amazed at how orderly the system had become, once the wheels were in motion. There was water now, plenty of it, hot, cold, and ice, with Joe working like a commando to keep things runnnig. Blood donors with sleeves rolled up were ready at a moment's notice. The CO had disappeared into the radio shack to tend to his administrative chores—that of apprising headquarters earth of the momentous happenings of the day.

It was time now to pack the leg with ice. Someone produced a waterproof parachute which, when stitched into a sock arrangement, would be the perfect container. The med tech could stand by and add ice cubes as the need arose. Strange how, in an era of advanced aerospace medicine, a simple process such as chilling the body prior to surgery was considered an advanced technique. In general surgery, Cindy knew that lowering the patient's body temperature retarded the entire metabolic process. Fifty percent less oxygen was required, circulation was slowed down and bleeding was controlled. There was less strain on the heart and other vital organs and it diminished the likelihood of post-operative shock immensely.

For this operation, however, the cold field would not only cut down the bleeding but would deaden the pain. This, in the absence of a staff of trained anesthesiologists to draw upon, was a vital consideration.

Now with the area and instruments sterile, Cindy, herself scrubbed up, donned the surgical cap, mask, and gown with which she was so familiar. How wise Dr. Lufkin had been to include this equipment in his medical supplies. Her gloves fitted well even though the perspiration was already seeping down to the palms of her hands. Her cap, pulled tightly over her short hair, was comfortable enough. She glanced over her mask at Dr. Lufkin and waited for him to speak.

"The site of amputation will be through the middle of the tibia and one inch higher on the fibula."

"Yes, doctor."

A tight tourniquet had been secured above the knee. Antiseptic was applied. She watched anxiously as he marked on the skin the level at which he would cut the bones.

Suddenly the patient stirred. Dr. Lufkin frowned. "Can you feel anything below the tourniquet?" he asked.

"No, but I can see you . . . and what you are doing."

Cindy leaned close to the man's face. "Would you like to have something over your eyes?"

"I . . . I guess not. You may as well go ahead."

Cindy took a deep breath. This was a moment in medicine that never ceased to fill her with awe and wonder at the courage of surgeons. Even the world's most highly skilled specialist will pause, perhaps only for a split second, before he makes that first incision. A human life is in his hands . . . such a responsibility is not for the faint hearted nor the novice.

He narrowed his eyes, and Cindy sensed another thought process. The doctor was seeing a job that had to be done.

Yes, a human life was in his hands and he was accepting the challenge to save it. Hippocrates, the ancient Greek father of medicine, said: ". . . For where there is love of man, there is also love of the art. . . ." Those words described very well the wiry little surgeon facing her across the operating table.

"Scalpel," he said.

She handed him the instrument. The med tech stared, mesmerized in hero worship as Dr. Lufkin began to make the circumferential incision in the skin below the mark at a distance of half the diameter of the leg. The strokes were swift and sure.

"Hemostat."

Every vessel was clamped tightly as it was severed. Now, with lateral cuts, he arranged anterior and posterior flaps. It was beautiful work . . . beautiful, even though the med tech's sudden pallor indicated he did not share her equanimity. Muscles were cut through, clamped, and ligated.

As she passed the instruments back and forth, she noted perspiration gathering in beads across the doctor's forehead. She nodded to the med tech to sponge the area.

"Sponge forceps." She was grateful that the area was comparatively sterile and dry because of the chilling process. "How's the ice holding out?" she asked the med tech.

"We could use some more. I'll go get it."

The patient's eyes were closed. He seemed to be resting comfortably. What a difference this was from the early barber-surgeon days. She remembered reading accounts of an eighteenth century writer, who said that an amputation is an operation terrible to bear, horrible to see, and must leave the person on whom it has been performed in a mutilated, imperfect state. . . . Her patient, by contrast, was perfectly comfortable and, with God's help, would someday be as good as new.

The minutes ticked by; she watched for signs of fatigue in the doctor. Strangely enough, there were none. He was too intent on what he was doing, as was she, to notice his own existence. Truly he had the heart of a lion and the hand of a woman as he pulled the nerves down gently, cut them, and let them retract in their sheaths.

He glanced up at her once. "Respiration?"

"Normal," she replied.

Slowly but firmly, he pushed the muscles back over the bones to expose the selected site of amputation. She had never seen the transistor saw in operation before. She glanced up to see the med tech bracing himself for what was about to happen. "Easy boy," Dr. Lufkin consoled. "It'll soon be over."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you want to leave?"

"No, sir. I . . . I'd like the experience."

"Very well." He pressed the switch and the saw sprang into action, cutting through the tibia and then, at a point one inch higher, through the fibula.

It was done!

Carefully the doctor rounded off the bone ends so that there would be no sharp areas to puncture the skin.

"Release the tourniquet, Cindy."

She did so. He continued to secure the remaining bleeding points by tying with ligatures. There would be drainage for several days so he inserted a rubber dam before closing the skin flaps.

At long last, Dr. Lufkin allowed himself the luxury of letting his arms fall to his sides. He heaved a sigh but did not speak. Conversation had been so limited—for so long. But then, words were often unnecessary between team members, who had gotten accustomed to one another and who knew their jobs. *The main job of nursing is to assist the doctor,* were the words that came to Cindy as she watched him pull the mask down from his face. In this instance though, more so than at any time in her career, she had worked as "one" with the surgeon. Could it be that her deeper understanding of the pioneer aspects of lunar medicine had something to do with it? Was it not true that being on the spot when the emergency arose intensified her abilities . . . shook loose those plus qualities?

She awaited further orders.

"You've done a wonderful job, Cindy. I couldn't have managed without you."

This compliment, she knew, referred to a lot more than the operation. It could have been nip and tuck from a number of angles, yet it worked out successfully. Her face beamed her pleasure. "The patient is resting well," she said, glancing once more at the relaxed features. "I don't think he felt any pain."

"I'm sure he didn't," replied the doctor. "And the beauty of it is, before long he'll be like a new man." He moved toward the doorway. "I'm a bit tired, Cindy. Will you finish up here? Bandage, you know the kind? And splint him well. Use one of those moon splints."

"Wilco," she said, then changed it to, "Yes, doctor."

He held up a hand. "I heard you the first time."

## 12

It was evening—City tunnel time—but still daylight Lunar time. Yet who really cared? A big job had been done, and it was successful. The patient was resting comfortably. All systems at Luna City were green or go, and the TV was especially interesting.

Cindy felt wonderful; not the rested exuberant kind of elation she'd known in the PM (pre-moon days) but the satisfied fatigue of having done a job well. Most intriguing, was the knowledge that this was not a *coup* that a groundhog newly arrived from earth could accomplish. She realized, as she slipped off her shoes, wiggled her tired toes, and sank into the couch of honor in the recreation room, that in a very short period of time, she had become "far out" indeed. In fact, she rather welcomed the news that she would have to stick around a few more days until the patient was fit for space travel.

Of course, *any* girl loves being spoiled. The mere fact that she is in the minority makes the situation terribly exciting. This, she remembered, was what she faced on arrival and, as Turk so aptly described it, went to her head. But she'd pulled out of her spin, adjusted her attitude and, lo and behold, things began to look up again.

The gang in the recreation room quieted their chitchat as the announcement flashed across the screen: "Ned Hinckley, America's Round the World Observer."

Turk passed her a goblet of moonshine—clear, cool, purified, delicious water. Joe handed her the popcorn. Had any queen in the history of mankind ever been treated so royally? People were really magnificent when you got right down to it. And at Luna City, where relationships were so basic, she saw for herself the old lesson of forgive and forget reenacted: To err is human. To forgive divine. Joe's secret mischief was certainly known, but no one spoke of it. She herself was back in favor even though someone must have discovered the water mix-up the night of the party. The CO was one of the gang again, and it was entirely possible that the "big eye" and the "long eye" were now ugly memories.

She would not pat herself on the back and take all the credit for the present good feeling amongst the selenauts. But, she would note in her confidential report to headquarters that a space nurse, who was properly trained and briefed, could contribute immensely to the entire effort.

She slipped off her cap and laid it on the table beside her. It was grand to be a part of the gang, to be accepted not only because she was a female, but because of her professional contributions. It astounded her to think she had ever been afraid of a jet ride or a blast-off in a spaceship. Somehow, personal danger or discomfort seemed so insignificant now.

She was startled out of her relaxed musings when someone said, "Hey, Cindy, listen."

"FLASH! ! The news as it happens around the world brought to you by Mini-Maj, a Division of Aerospace General, makers of those fine products for better living. And now a word from our sponsors."

"Gosh," said Cindy. "Is there no escape from commercials?"

"Shhhhhhh."

The picture flashed to a glamorous young matron with a beautiful hairdo, a glistening smile, an after-five gown, and very high heeled shoes. The selenauts whistled dutifully until the picture switched to five small, beautifully dressed children lined up beside a handsome father. He wore black tie and dinner jacket.

"This happy family has just moved into a new home." Singing violins accompanied the lady as she whipped out a gadget from the packing box. "But there has been no drudgery, no confusion, no heaving, lifting, rolling, and unrolling of old-fashioned carpets because it's all right here in Mini-Maj's newest product, Spray-Carp." More violins as the lady beamed at the camera, then proceeded to spray a brand new carpet onto the floor. There was a touching family embrace, a wink at the camera from good old dad, who'd obviously bought the new gadget for Mother's Day. Then, off to dinner at an expensive restaurant.

Cindy had seen this commercial a dozen times. She stifled a yawn of boredom as she realized she had seen this entire program about a month earlier. But she must not appear conceited or superior. After all, it was *her* ship that brought the precious film. The men would not like to be reminded that this documentary was even a wee bit out of date.

Actually, it was one of the better shows because it summarized the amazing things that had happened in recent years. It was fun to see the comparison between now and the old days: the fabulous fifties, the soaring sixties, and as some wags dubbed it, the scintillating seventies.

For instance, the cities in those days were ugly, dirty, and dingy with smoky factories polluting the air. Now the super metropolises were better planned. They were beautiful, easy to get to, with green trees and flowers making them like the countryside of the past.

"But," said Ned Hinckley, "who is left in the rural regions to grow food for the multitude of people?"

The camera switched to a view of waving grain and tall corn. "Even by the year 1970, only six percent of our population was needed to supply food sufficient for the entire country. Today, that figure has dropped to five percent. This is due to the advancements in agricultural science and technology. We can now grow three times as much food on the same acreage as we did seventy years ago."

Cindy and the selenauts smiled with amusement at the quaint scene of a man milking a cow. In a modern "milking parlor," one man could handle fifty cows in an hour. And what about egg production? In the old days, some hatched into hens, others into roosters. Not so anymore. Eggs are dipped into an estrogen solution to assure that an egg-producing hen will crack its way out of the shell. Old-fashioned tomatoes were shown as curiosities, as were potatoes and other vegetables. Today's tomato was the size of a cantaloupe and one potato was large enough to feed a family of four. The modern food was more nutritious, too, with the development of new plants that were high in protein rather than in carbohydrates.

When this news flashed across the screen, the botanist piped up cheerily. "Hey, there's my new fungus. In four days, it can produce protein equivalent to chipped beef. Isn't it a beauty?"

It was breathtaking to Cindy to see how desert and wastelands had been reclaimed and transformed into rich farming areas. With the great conservation of water and reuse of it, there was no longer any such thing as a "badlands." Even seawater was desalted and frozen by solar energy. This lowered the cost of fresh water to about thirty cents per thousand gallons.

"On the earth, that is," someone quipped.

With machines taking the drudgery out of living, about two-thirds of the population could now engage in inventive work in areas such as medicine, scientific research in geriatrics, synthetics, explorations of the polar regions and the ocean bottoms, as well as space.

The selenauts chorused indignantly, "Well, thanks a whole!"

Cindy chuckled at this lunar habit of talking back to the TV all the time. She found herself joining in, "Okay, but I still don't see how there's going to be enough room in America for so many people, what with decreased death rates, increased birth rates and everyone living so long."

Ned Hinckley held up his hand and faced the camera squarely: "I know that you're thinking this can't go on, but the truth of the matter is there are many less populated areas in which Americans can now live—right here on earth."

The camera flashed to a panorama of white snow and ice. "For interesting living in a pioneer atmosphere, many families have chosen the Arctic and Antarctica for their new home sites."

"Brrrr," Turk said. "That's strictly for the birds. Penguins that is."

The scene showed the city, built entirely under ice. It depended on atomic heat and power for its survival.

Once more the commercials flashed onto the screen. There was a dishwasher that not only washed the dishes but stacked and stored them as well; a room air-conditioner, courtesy of Mini-Maj, that was the size of a walnut; a motion-picture camera the size of a pack of cigarettes; a light bulb no bigger than a pinhead; an electric motor about the diameter of a dime.

Turk glanced at Cindy when the TV showed a house made of collapsible panels. "I bought one like that for my mother but she gave it back. She got tired of rearranging it."

Cindy laughed. "I'll bet you kept bringing home stray astronaut buddies so the place was all guest rooms and no house."

He looked startled. "How'd you know?"

"Intuition." She stood up and slipped on her shoes. "You know, I hate to turn in but, as the old saying goes, tomorrow is another day."

"Goodnight, Cindy."

"Goodnight, everybody."

She got as far as the tunnel to her room when Turk, who had followed, stopped her. "You know, I've been wanting to say something about calling you a 'swell head.' That was a pretty strong statement."

She was surprised by his sincerity and the lack of cockiness in his manner. If he was going to level with her, she would do the same with him. "Maybe I deserved it," she said guardedly.

"Agreed. But I'm not your room mother or official shepherd." He examined his fingernails. "Of course, you could have told me to mind my own business."

"Would you have listened?"

"No."

Her face felt very warm. A crazy tingling crept up her spine and across her scalp. "I . . . I guess I'd better go now."

His hand touched her arm. "Don't, Cindy." His mind seemed to be racing. With effort, he pulled himself back into the old swing of things. "It's all that stuff on TV that's gotten you confused. Electronic gadgets, automatic dusters, spray-on carpets, and city living under the ice. They're no good without the old-fashioned things mixed with them."

"Like what?" She swallowed hard and backed away. He followed, as though drawn to a magnet.

"Like moon and June . . . and people and . . . Hey, you've got three freckles at the corner of your right eye. Where'd they come from?"

"They've always been there." Her voice sounded husky.

"Well, I never saw a girl with markings like that. Except Gwendolyn."

The shivers in her scalp subsided. His face cooled. "Who's Gwendolyn?"

"My spaniel. You'll love her."

Cindy turned away before her relief became too evident. Turk spoke again. "Know what?"

"What?"

"There's a beautiful earth out tonight."

"It's not night," she protested. "And you know it."

There was a long pause. In the background, she could hear the selenauts adjusting the TV set to another channel. It sounded like a western. "Why don't you slip into something lovely, and we'll have an earthlight stroll?"

It was too fantastic, too ridiculous an invitation to refuse. Imagine climbing into pounds and pounds of cumbersome space gear just to stand knee-deep in dust and clank helmets for a while. "I realize that no one ever goes out alone on the moon."

"That's right. No stags allowed. Suits can spring a leak or something." He raised one eyebrow. "My life is in your hands."

She laughed. "I give up. Duty comes first." Then she added, "Besides, your invitation is just plain out of this world."

## 13

As the "days" went by, Cindy was thrilled to see the remarkable recovery of her patients. Dr. Zizak, comfortably splinted and propped up in bed, could now watch television shows on the small set the selenauts had rigged up for him. Dr. Reed's memory had returned at last after long hours of chats and reminiscing with Cindy. His shoulder cast held up nicely and was only slightly annoying because it restricted his activities. Dr. Tsing's gastrointestinal problems were giving him less and less difficulty so that most of the time he was ambulatory, able to walk into the recreation room under his own steam. The selenauts were truly marvelous in their assistance with physical therapy, and Joe outdid himself concocting different but delicious menus for the gang.

It seemed everyone had his heart set on getting the scientists home by Christmas, especially since the delay of the operation. It was, in a way, like going home themselves. As she glanced at the calendar, she realized they could still make it *if* nothing unforeseen happened. One thing that amused her was the sudden speedup of traffic to Luna City. Since her arrival, there had been two visits from the local Space Station, not to mention an unannounced stopover of a deep-space vehicle. "The place is beginning to look like Grand Central Station," Joe muttered as he tossed more goop into the stew so that it would stretch to feed the extra mouths. "I wouldn't care if they didn't arrive so hungry."

Once she saw Waldo, and they had a wonderful time talking about Ellie and the plans that were in the offing. He was a nice looking fellow, very studious, with thick horn-rimmed glasses. As an electronics engineer, it was his job to get around and check the equipment at all our space establishments. In talking about marriage under such circumstances, Waldo explained rather hazily, "It's not how much you're together with a certain person, but how it is when you are."

"Wouldn't you ever consider settling down on earth?" Cindy asked. "You know, be a family man and everything?" She refused to admit, even to herself, that her question had anything to do with Turk.

Waldo was quick to reply. "This is my work. Ellie knows that. Why if I were grounded, sitting back there on earth worrying about how my instruments were holding up, I'd be a psycho case in six months." He grinned pleasantly. "Besides, now that you've made this trip out here, I don't see why Ellie and I can't plan to set up housekeeping at Luna City. A lot of other guys kind of figure that way, too."

Eventually, all of the company left. The colony settled back to normal to wait out the remaining time before the big Space Evac. It was a pleasant time of Lunar afternoon, and Cindy was seated beside Dr. Tsing in the recreation room. The men were engaged in their various work projects and she herself would not have minded some time off to write to dad, just in case another spaceship beat theirs back. Yet she realized that being in the company of a man like Dr. Tsing was an opportunity that didn't happen to everyone. He was certainly one of the earth's great thinkers and philosophers, in addition to being a leading scientist. Perhaps he would talk about some of his scientific experiments, or better yet, philosophize about the mysteries of the space era in which they were living. There was so much she did not understand . . . so much she wanted to learn.

He was not a man who could talk easily, and she tried to respect this in her care of him. Often they would sit for an hour or two without saying a word. When he did speak, she never knew what subject he'd choose.

"Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science." His fine, almond-shaped eyes looked down at his folded hands. "Wordsworth said that, and it is true. Do you enjoy poetry?"

"Yes," she said. "Very much. I have a friend who . . ." she stopped herself. "Would you like me to read some Wordsworth?"

He nodded. "If it is not too much trouble."

She aimed her electronic microscope on *BOOKS UNLIMITED* and began. The poem was one of her favorites:

"I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine . . ."

The air was rent with the alarm of the CO as he rushed out of the radio shack. "An unidentified object is headed this way," he gasped as he bonged the alarm bell. "All Hands! All Hands! This is an emergency!"

Cindy and Dr. Tsing sat bolt upright, staring as men rushed into the room, on the double. The whole tranquil scene became one of mass confusion as they crowded around the CO. "What do you mean—unidentified object?" the botanist demanded.

"Yeah," Turk agreed. "That went out with flying saucers."

"Well, let's see what it looks like on radar," someone suggested.

"You won't see much," the CO said firmly. "The pattern is too fuzzy."

Cindy's heart thudded with alarm as all eyes focused on the man who had suffered the "big eye" and the "long eye." Had he cracked up at last? She stood up, wondering what to say at a time like this. "Please everybody, let's hear what the commanding officer has to say."

She noted he was sweating profusely and his eyes looked slightly wild. His voice shook as he spoke. "Whatever it is, I can't establish radio contact with it. And furthermore, the thing is traveling far faster than . . . than light!"

A moan of derision issued from the group. That did it! Nothing could travel faster than the speed of light. Einstein proved that with his theory of relativity. Even Cindy was eyeing the sodium amytal in her kit, remembering that this was the old stand-by for knocking out a violent psychiatric patient.

He began backing away. "Okay, wise guys, *you* establish contact with it, or them."

"Thanks, I will." Turk strutted forward and disappeared into the radio shack. The others including Cindy and Dr. Tsing followed.

"Hello. Hello. This is Moon Control. Come in please!" The panel was a maze of flashing colored lights and beeping signals. That in itself indicated *something* was near. Turk pressed the receiver to his ear. "Do you read me?" His voice rose as he repeated the question. Finally he shouted, "Identify yourself!"

The beeps grew louder. Dancing patterns of light brightened and clarified on the screen. "Hiro, take a look through the periscope. I'll keep trying to make contact."

The CO bent over radio-earth. "This is Luna City. Emergency. Over." He tensed himself to wait out the two minute delay, which now seemed an eternity. "Come in Earth . . ." He whirled around to Turk. "Our radios are cut off. Man the weapons systems!"

"It's too late," Hiro shouted. "I can see it now through the periscope!"

The CO ran over and pressed his eyes to the instrument. "Good Lord! It's a ship I think . . . but not one of ours. This one's round and shiny. It looks like they're in trouble."

Turk called, "But there's no 'Mayday' distress signal."

The CO's knuckles blanched as he eased the instrument around. "The flight pattern is completely erratic . . . they've passed the landing area three miles away . . . they're headed for the center of the city!"

Cindy's mouth felt hot and dry. Her voiced cracked, "My patients! I must get them into protective suits. They are helpless . . ." She started away but Dr. Tsing held her arm stiffly.

"There is no time for that. If it happens, we will all go together."

There was no time even to think, or worry. Turk and the CO faced each other. "Communication systems are dead."

Hiro, at the periscope again, whispered tensely, "They're directly over the city."

A deathly silence settled over the group for one . . . two . . . maybe three seconds. The stillness seemed to roar in

Cindy's ears. Her feet felt glued to the floor. She stared at Hiro and was suddenly fascinated by the black bristly hair now standing straight up like a brush. "The ship has no rockets to power it."

All of them thought the same thing—at the same time. That it was not a ship, but a guided war missile aimed at destroying the City and everyone in it. Turk moved over quickly and stood behind her.

And they waited.

"It is hovering . . . right outside. I cannot see it very well because it is so close. The sun's glare is blinding."

The CO looked, rubbed his eyes, and looked again. "It is settling down. It has landed." His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "It is right outside the tunnel entrance."

The sound of the air lock buzzer startled them out of their paralysis. "Arm yourselves, men," the CO barked. When this was done, he pushed the button to allow whoever or whatever it was to enter the decontamination chamber. In a group, they rushed to the window. Gone was the "ladies first" routine. Cindy awaited her turn.

"Heavens, what are they? . . . Midgets maybe? . . . Where did they come from? . . . We haven't used clothes like that since the sixties . . ."

Turk boosted Cindy up so that she could have a look. Two very short figures in antiquated pressure suits stared back at her through oversized helmets. One figure pointed at her and clapped its hands. She dropped back to the floor, thoroughly mystified. "Maybe General Craig finally found not one, but two midgets from the Andes with Ph.D's."

Not knowing their origin, it was necessary to keep the things in the chamber longer than usual. The suspense was killing, but at long last, the door opened and they walked inside.

They apparently did not know how to remove their helmets. The CO strode over cautiously. "Cover me, boys. We'll see what's what here."

Now with all weapons trained on the strangers, the helmets were removed. The CO's tough features stiffened with shock and disbelief. An inhuman sound escaped his lips as he staggered backward. No one could speak . . . it was all like a crazy dream. There was a shuffling sound behind Cindy as Joe moved forward. "Why, they're just a couple of kids. A little boy and a little girl."

The men lowered their weapons guiltily. "Yeah, that's what they look like. Sure, just a couple of kids." A ripple of laughter and relief ran through the group. "Imagine getting all excited over . . . Hey, wait a minute!"

"Yeah," the chorus agreed.

The CO recovering from his initial shock, stepped forward again. "Who are you? What are you doing here? Why didn't you answer our radio signals?"

The youngsters looked up at him with friendly interest. They turned their heads from side to side, searching his face with curiosity. The boy appeared to be the older, perhaps nine years old. His black curly hair was cut short. His luminous brown eyes were lavishly lashed. His skin tone had a pale blue tint to it. The girl would be about seven back home. Her eyes were a penetrating amber color and her golden hair fell in ringlets to her shoulders. She too had the strange skin tone. They spoke to each other in unintelligible squeaks, then the boy turned back to the CO.

"My name is Nointa, which in our language means Mountain Boy. This is my sister Eumah, which means Pale Star." He glanced at the stunned selenauts. "Our names are rather like your American Indians." There was more squeaking between them. Finally, Eumah managed an awkward curtsy.

Cindy found her voice at last. "Can't we help you out of those suits?"

"Thank you very much," the boy said. "We did not realize we had misjudged our costuming to such an extent. We had hoped we would not stand out in the crowd."

"Yipes!" said the botanist, still too stunned to believe his eyes.

Both children wore underclothing of a burnt gold, metallic material that fitted tightly all the way to their feet and over their hands. The neckline was of a turtle-neck fashion. There were several snap-flap arrangements about the waist and chest—otherwise the appearance was that of a pair of charming though astounding elves.

They leaped with delight at the newfound freedom, pointing this way and that at the crude furniture, the TV set, the periscope and especially at the people. "See, I told you Eumah," the boy said happily. "These trips are well worth our while."

The tiny blond squeaked her agreement as she pranced up to the bowl of popcorn on the coffee table. She examined a fluffy white kernel, and popped it into her pocket. Nointa scolded her, "How many times have I told you to *ask* for specimens, not *take* them." He turned to the sputtering, fuming CO. "Sisters!" he exclaimed.

Somehow the group of selenauts managed to get its breath again. Brains began to function once more. Turk mentioned gently that perhaps a de-briefing was in order. Hiro agreed that certain questions had better be answered before the whole gang went into deep and permanent shock.

"Of course, of course," said the CO, waving a pointed finger to establish order. "You two. Come here."

They pranced over, smiled disarmingly and Eumah curtsied again, this time with the grace of a ballet dancer. Nointa said, "She is very slow in languages. I shall answer your questions."

The CO cleared his throat. "All right. Where are you from?"

"I cannot tell you."

"And why can't you tell me? Are you a spy? An agent sent by our enemies . . . ?"

The boy and girl snickered and squeaked for a brief moment. Nointa straightened up and squared his shoulders. "If I told you, you would not understand anyway."

The CO's nostrils tightened with frustration. "Are you insinuating that I am stupid?"

"No."

"No, what?"

"No, sir." The brown eyes rolled upwards. Then he wrinkled his nose in Cindy's direction, indicating he hoped this unpleasant conversation would soon end.

"Are you from Mars?"

"No. I mean, No, sir."

"Another planet then?"

"Yes."

His sister squeaked, "Sir."

The CO let out another inhuman groan and flapped his arms dejectedly. "I'm tired," he said to his men. "I'm getting too old for Luna City duty."

Hiro asked hesitantly, "Are you from another solar system?"

They peered interestedly at his Oriental eyes, suddenly quite intrigued. "Yes. Are you?"

Hiro slumped back on the couch, put his chin in his hand and said, "I give up."

Turk took his turn, and Cindy was strangely touched by his tenderness. "Look fella, we've got to have a few straight answers here. Headquarters earth will have our scalps if we don't. Also, we wouldn't be human if we didn't wonder about why a couple of nice youngsters like you are batting around the universe—unchaperoned as it were."

Nointa warmed up to Turk's kind words. "We were—well, we were collecting specimens for our museum. Everybody else at home has got everything. But they get them on field trips. Eumah and I figured we could beat those other kids . . ."

"What kind of specimens are you after?" Turk asked evenly.

"Oh, stuff from primitive earth." He stopped himself. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend."

"That's all right." Turk took a deep breath to cover his indignant reaction. "But I don't suppose you'll find any cave man's clubs or Stone Age implements here at Luna City. If you cared to go as far as earth you could check at the Smithsonian . . ."

Nointa and Eumah squeaked awhile, then nodded in unison. "We've decided Luna City is as far back in history as we need to go."

Cindy stopped the CO before he could grab the elves and turn them over his knee. "All right, kids. Tell me this. How come you're smart enough to work the instruments on your ship to get you this far from home—granted, of course, that you swiped the old man's buggy?"

Nointa looked startled. "Instruments?"

"Yes. You know, the little gidgets and gadgets and stuff with which you steer your crate?"

More squeaking and wordless shaking of the heads.

Turk asked, "How did you land? What happened to our radio communication?"

Nointa smiled again at his friend. "Oh, don't worry. We'll put your radios back in operation before we leave."

"Well, thanks a lot."

Eumah skipped over to Cindy and looked up admiringly. Then she shyly grasped the young nurse's hand. Cindy shivered. The tiny hand was as cold as ice. Nointa spoke again. "My sister likes you. It was her idea that we visit Luna City while you were here. She said if a woman were around, the men would not hurt us."

"Well, I wouldn't be so sure," the CO said sternly. "If you don't start telling me the truth about this business . . ."

Joe could stand it no longer. "Aw, for Pete's sake. Let the kids alone. You want to scare 'em or something?" He jerked his head. "Come on into the kitchen Buster. Let Uncle Joe fix you something to eat."

"Eat?" Nointa asked, his brown eyes widening with interest.

"Yeah. I don't know what you call it in your language but in English it's . . ." he opened his mouth and pointed inside. Then he rubbed his apron-fronted stomach.

Cindy knelt down and touched Eumah's golden curls. They felt strangely reminiscent of spun metal or gold. She drew her hand away. "After you've had your snacks, Uncle Joe and I will show you around our city. And we will help you collect the specimens you need." She glanced up at the CO and winked. Perhaps she as a woman could win their confidence and learn the answers to the burning questions. Certainly blunt questioning was getting them nowhere fast.

The CO grumbled a moment, then said, "All right, men. Back to your stations."

Of course, it would be impossible for them to get any work done. Still it was better than standing around gaping. The men dispersed, all except Dr. Tsing and Dr. Lufkin. "Tell me doctor, did you notice anything strange about their physiological make-up . . ."

As the children sat perched on the high kitchen stools, Cindy busied herself gathering items which interested them. A stick of gum, a bobby pin, a lock of her own red hair. She sketched out a paper doll for Eumah and some clothes to go with it. Nointa was fascinated with Joe's activities. "What do you do with those green things?"

"What do you mean, things?" Joe feigned surprise. "Those are cookies—to eat." He went through the motions again. "Have one."

Nointa picked one from the plate and carefully tucked it in his pocket. Encouraged by Joe's friendliness he asked if he might have a hoot dog.

"You mean a hot dog?" The big cook laughed out loud. "Sure thing. I'll show you how to make 'em."

They stood around, fascinated as Joe ground up the meat filling, seasoned it and stuffed it into the frankfurter casing. "Now," he said proudly, "I'll cook it for you."

"Oh, no," the boy said. "I'll take it as is."

"Great guns," Joe sighed with discouragement. "These kids sure must have strict parents."

"Parents!" Cindy and Joe both spoke at once. Cindy assumed her most innocent pose as she asked, "Don't you think we'd better let your folks know where you are so they won't worry?"

Nointa grinned impishly. "They're asleep. We'll be back before they wake up." He hopped down from the stool. "Could we please look around a bit before we leave?"

Things went along very smoothly, considering that the entire colony was in an uproar. The children danced and pranced and played some sort of flying game where they dove over one another's shoulders. In no time at all, Eumah learned to say Cindy's name. For a small boy, Nointa was alarmingly knowledgeable and articulate. He was particularly interested in the sick bay where Cindy allowed him to hear the sounds of Dr. Zizak's heartbeats through the stethoscope.

His sister, of course, loved the animals, particularly the fuzzy white rabbits. The baby bunnies were at their cutest age, and Cindy gently placed one in Eumah's arms. The child squeaked with delight and began making murmuring noises from the back of her throat. The bunnies' ears perked up as she stood it on its hind legs in the palm of her hands.

Cindy whispered to Joe. "This is kind of eerie, but I'll swear those two understand each other."

Joe nodded. "I was thinkin' the same thing."

# 14

As the hours ticked by, the scanty information the children had given them became even more hopelessly confused. The CO was still near panic because of the radio failure, but no amount of coaxing would bring Nointa to put it into operation again. "Look children. It's been nice knowing you, but enough's enough. Kindergarten is closed for the day. We've got work to do."

Nointa looked at Eumah, at Cindy, Joe, and then back to the CO. "I understand perfectly," he said in careful English. "My sister and I have completed our mission and . . ." He put his hand to his forehead. He rubbed his eyes. His body began to weave.

Cindy shouted, "Catch him, Joe. He's going to faint!"

Joe's big arms swooped the boy up before he hit the floor.

"Put him on the bench." Cindy's mind swung quickly into action. "Call Dr. Lufkin."

What to do for a child who has fainted? She placed him in a supine position. "Give me a cushion to elevate his feet!"

Turk was beside her, helping as best he could.

"Check Eumah," Cindy said. "See if you can get any information out of her. Joe, get me some cold cloths." She gasped as she saw Eumah twirl in bewilderment, squeak weakly, and swoon into a collapse.

Dr. Lufkin hurried into the room. His face paled as he knelt over the boy. He then checked the girl. "Blood pressure, low; pulse, slowed down."

Cindy nodded, her mouth set in a tight thin line of anxiety. Both children were unconscious. She lifted the tiny, cold wrist of the little girl. "Pulse weak and thready." She bit her lip nervously. "Dr. Lufkin, the children are not sweating."

"I know. And I can't seem to bring either of them around!"

By now, the entire gang had crept into the recreation room. "The children! What happened to them? Who did it? Who hurt 'em?"

Joe stuck out his chest and held out his arms. "Everybody stand back. Cindy and the doc will bring them around. They just fainted because . . . because . . ." his scowl was creased with fright. "Because what, doc?"

Dr. Lufkin stood up and addressed the group. "The children appear to have collapsed from weakness, caused from lack of," he put his hand up to Joe, indicating no offense intended, "caused from lack of food intake."

"Holy smokes," the cook exploded. "I offered them everything I had, including a homemade hot dog. Cookies, candy, sandwiches . . ." His eyes darkened, "Come to think of it, they didn't put anything in their mouths. I figured their folks had told them not to." He glanced at the gang, "Well, you know the old saying: never take candy from a stranger and all that stuff?"

The CO rallied from his initial shock. There was nothing as devastating for a full grown man to view as the unconscious bodies of two beautiful children. "It was my fault. I scared them to death." He grabbed Dr. Lufkin's suit lapels. "Doc, you've got to do something. What will I tell headquarters?" A thought struck him. "I could never tell headquarters anything! The radio's dead and always will be unless . . ."

Cindy was startled to see Dr. Tsing totter weakly across the floor. His face reflected his fright and worry, also his curiosity. He was calm, very calm as he spoke with Dr. Lufkin. "We were speaking earlier of the physiological differences these children exhibited. Although I am not a medical doctor, I have been observing certain interesting phenomena."

Cindy was still working determinedly with the little girl. Dr. Lufkin was using every trick known, to help Nointa regain consciousness. "What have you observed? That the children refuse to eat . . . that they have strange skin tones . . . that their hair is of a different texture than that with which we are familiar?"

"Precisely," the Chinese scientist observed.

"Well, what is your suggestion?" Dr. Lufkin wiped the perspiration from his brow with the back of his hand. "I'll try anything, but we can't let them die . . . right here."

The selenauts huddled in a saddened group, each man wondering if he had said or done anything that caused the children to become as sick as this.

Dr. Tsing moved closer to the boy. "Please, examine the costume of our visitor." For the first time, the flaps were unfastened to reveal bits and pieces of Lunar treasures he'd been given. "Yet, here is another area which interests me greatly." A strange little valve protruded from Nointa's bare skin at about waist level. "You will find this on the girl, also."

Joe, hands on hips, demanded, "What's this got to do with starving kids?"

"Just this, my learned chef. These children do not eat as we do on earth, or here at the moon. We earth people are parasites because we must depend on plants to give us energy-producing food. All animals are parasites because they cannot make adenosine triphosphate—ATP, directly from light, as plants do."

"So?" Joe persisted.

"So, we in our experiments in sub-cellular activities have been studying how photosynthetic cells use light to produce energy. When we learn what the cell does with the sun, that is, when we learn the secret of the energy conversion process, we earth people will no longer need food to give us life-sustaining energy."

The selenauts frowned skeptically.

Joe said, "You mean, go without eating?"

"Exactly."

Dr. Lufkin, who had been following the scientist's train of thought, leaped forward excitedly. "It's a fantastic scheme, but it's our only hope."

The two men examined again the mysterious valve at the boy's waist. "They undoubtedly have a closed ecological system within their bodies," he explained. "The problem is, how much of a charge ought we to give them?"

He motioned to the electronics expert. "Can you connect these children to the colony's electrical system?"

The man swallowed. His eyes were wide with reluctance to try what seemed to be a murderous stunt. "I have children of my own back home. I don't like this. They might be electrocuted."

Dr. Lufkin spoke with even tones. "I will take the responsibility. As matters now stand, this is their only chance."

Cindy shuddered as she watched the tiny wires being attached to the weakened bodies. How terrible to have so much food here and be unable to save their lives in any other way. Would it be painful, she wondered as the engineer moved to press the switch.

Oh don't let them die! Please! Whoever or whatever they are, they are so little, so interesting, and so very sweet. The short visit they'd had was like a breath of spring to the routine living at the City. Well, perhaps it was more like a cyclone, but Cindy had found an unusual amount of tenderness in her heart for these two beguiling creatures. Yes, they had brought out the strangest reactions in everyone.

She watched Nointa's closed eyes with the thick dark lashes.

"Now, take it very easy. Watch for my hand signal," Dr. Tsing cautioned the switchman. Cindy braced herself as though she, too, were having high voltage shoved into her life system.

The boy . . . his body began to quiver and his eyelids fluttered. "Off! Off!" the Chinese called excitedly. His hands trembled with tense joy as he turned to the little girl. "Let us follow the same procedure," he said hoarsely.

The split seconds seemed like hours. Cindy and the selenauts stiffened as electric sparks threatened to ignite the scientist's cuffs. Then it happened. The spiral curls came to life with a tinselly sound. Color returned to the pale blue cheeks. A funny little moan was emitted from the thin, parted lips.

Cindy did not realize she'd had a tight grip on Turk's arm until he muttered uncomfortably, "You've been taking vitamins again, haven't you?"

In no time at all, Nointa and Eumah were their old selves, bouncing and springing about as they made their way toward the air lock. "Are you ready to leave, little sister?"

She squeaked her assent.

He held up a hand and waved a salute. "Well, everybody, it's been very nice. If you're ever out our way, please drop in."

Colonel Hathaway, the CO, found what was left of his husky voice. "But you still haven't told us where . . ."

Eumah interrupted with a series of worried squeaks.

"Yes sister, that was a narrow escape. And Dr. Tsing, I must compliment you on your excellent deductions. Do carry on your experimental work. One day soon, the problems of food for all earth beings will be completely eliminated." He turned back to his sister. "Shall we be off?"

Eumah was still terribly agitated. Now she was pointing to Joe who was standing with his back to the crowd. No one had noticed him, once the children were revived.

"I hate to leave him like this," Nointa said.

Eumah nodded her agreement.

"He gave us gum and made us a hoot dog and let us play in his kitchen. The cook is a very kind man."

Joe turned around, a wistful crooked smile on his thick lips. "Aw, don't worry about me. Go on out and play."

But the children were in a huddle, each squeaking in higher tones as the conversation reached a climax. They apparently winked at each other, shook hands and turned to face the gang again. "Cooks are a fine species of earth man. It would be a pity if they became extinct because of our untimely visit." He addressed the CO. "I must apologize for having to do this, but I must erase your memories."

The room was suddenly plunged into whiteness as a thick cool cloud engulfed it. The silent radio blared forth as if it had never been quieted. Cindy felt very dizzy, sleepy, but somehow very comfortable and pleasant.

The fog lifted, and she found herself seated beside Dr. Tsing. The recreation room was deserted except for selenauts hurrying to and from their tasks. Joe was humming in the kitchen. Dinner smelled lovely. "I seem to have lost my place," she said as she adjusted her microscope. "Oh, yes, here we are."

"Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the Milky Way.
They stretched in never ending line
Along the margin of a bay
Ten thousand saw I at a glance
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance . . ."

## 15

"Well, Cindy, are you all packed?"

"Yes, sir. Packed and ready to go." She followed Dr. Lufkin into the sick bay to give a final check-out on the patients. They'd all had their immunization shots, which would fortify them with an impervious wall against infectious disease organisms. Because of Dr. Zizak's recent surgery, he had been given an injection of bone marrow which would protect him from radiation during flight. Morale was excellent.

Dr. Lufkin grinned. "You men all set to make history?"

"Yes, sir!" they chorused.

It was not an easy task to fit them into their suits, particularly since Cindy was unfamiliar with the deep-space-probe type. But again, teamwork paid off with the med tech, Hiro, and a half dozen selenauts eager to be of service. A litter was rigged up to carry Dr. Zizak to the hastily converted lunarmobile, now referred to as the LASS, short for Lunar Ambulance Service Special. All medications, plus an emergency supply of whole blood, had been stowed aboard. Hiro reminded her of the exercise equipment, although they had room for only a hand pulley and two rubber balls. The CO came forward with the mail pouch. Last but not least, Joe produced box lunches for the crowd, consisting mainly of . . . she peeked inside, algae cookies!

She made her final checkup to see if she'd forgotten anything. It would be so easy to leave bits and pieces around that would, in this case, be most annoying to mail home to her. She glanced once more at the tiny cell of a room that had really become quite homey. She'd gotten used to the candy-pink walls and the smoky-colored chest of drawers (still of undetermined origin) and the narrow bed. Next trip she would bring some gay material, enough for a ruffle or two, to simulate a window and a little bottle of that Spray-Carp for the floor . . .

Next trip? She laughed out loud at her own nonsense. She hadn't finished this one yet. Talk about itchy feet! She cast a fleeting, amused glance at the washstand. On impulse, she whipped out her lipstick and scrawled across the tops of the disposable towels, PROPERTY OF: U.S. Aerospace Force Nurse Corps. A decoration of a daisy or two, and her job was finished.

She had anticipated the parting from her selenaut friends as being rough, and she had tried to brace herself for it. Blubbering like a female would never do. Yet as they stood around, shaking her hand and wishing her well, she knew this was one of the most rugged tasks she had yet performed. *Smile,* she told herself fiercely as her lip quivered. *Keep smiling.* She curled her toes inside her boots until they painfully reminded her that number one, she was an officer; number two, she was a nurse; and number three, she was an American woman setting a precedent.

"You've all been wonderful," she said feeling hopelessly lost for words. "I can never thank you enough." Now, that was worse yet!

She took a deep breath. "Fellas, thanks for taking me into the family and . . ." she smiled. "If they'll let me, I'll be back." That did it. The horrible "gone forever" feeling was passed. The men suggested, "bring a twin . . . or a friend . . . make it two friends . . ."

Cindy laughed. "I'll try. I really will."

Turk appeared. "Let's get this show on the road. It's nearing 'T' time and I don't mean with crumpets."

As Cindy started up the ladder to climb into the ship's air lock, she paused. One more look at the pale blue ball of earth, matriarch of gravity. One more glance at the stars . . . and beyond and beyond and beyond . . . to atom worlds within atom worlds, oceans within earthly oceans, constellations beyond constellations and universes outside the universe. Oh, how could she have ever doubted the wisdom, the need, the absolute necessity for space travel?

Why, out there across the seas of space lay the raw materials of the imagination, without which all forms of art must eventually sicken and die. To remain earthbound at this point in technology would be like crawling back into the ocean from where all life began. Cindy found it hard to believe that she was the same person who had climbed down from this ladder not so long ago. Scared, uncertain, and ridiculously overconfident, she had somehow managed to finish her job rather well. But with experiences, such as she'd known in space, and with seeing for herself that her home planet was merely a tiny world in a remote corner of an infinite universe, any tendency toward conceit or self-importance was forever shattered.

She had wondered once, a lifetime ago, if the goals of space enthusiasts were worthy ones or merely rainbows for adventurers. Now she knew, unequivocally.

The patients were already comfortably strapped to their mesh litters. Nearby were the foam and plastic cocoons that they would wear during reentry into earth's atmosphere. It would be her responsibility to care for these men, guard them with her life if necessary, during the long trip home. She thanked God for Dr. Lufkin's reassuring presence as she remembered the Flight Nurses of World War II and the Korean Conflict, who had evacuated whole plane loads of critically wounded fighting men from battle zones. Down through the years, her sister nurses had flown to every corner of the earth to pick up sick and injured men, women, and children, who needed medical care in a major hospital. These women flew without doctors aboard. Often, they were without med tech assistance. She had a feeling that someday in the future, nurses would carry on this same tradition in Space Evac.

The countdown started. While Cindy chatted reassuringly with the patients, Turk and Dr. Lufkin went through the long checklist. Pressure switches, battery conditions, propellant levels . . . every detail, no matter how slight, had to be thoroughly investigated. Not only must their departure time be accurate, but the guidance-system platform must tilt at the correct direction toward earth for the vertical takeoff. Their destination, Cape Doneval, was after all a very tiny spot on planet earth, which was whirling around once every twenty-four hours. At the end of their sixty-hour flight from the moon and their ninety-minute descent through the atmosphere, they would make almost a dead-stick landing. With a load as heavy as this ship carried, there would not be enough fuel left to dilly dally. With patients aboard, they simply must land at the designated area where ambulances would be waiting to carry the precious human cargo to the medical center.

Strange how, on the trip up, she'd found herself becoming impatient with the long, seemingly overcomplicated ritual of getting the ship into the air. Now, she was mentally urging her two space jockeys to take their time . . . better be safe than sorry, as the panel lights flashed information. Tanks pressurized, ignition circuitry armed, gyros uncaged . . .

"Better strap down, Cindy," Turk called.

Obediently she did so, now quite proud of herself for knowing which thing went where. The patients gave her the thumb and forefinger, A-okay salute.

Through her headphones, she heard Dr. Lufkin say, "Coming up on X minus one hundred twenty seconds."

"A-roger," Turk replied. "Arm the sequencer."

From where she lay, Cindy could see the second hand sweep over the chronometer. Flashing lights . . . beeping signals . . . breathless anticipation. The second hand swept around again. Five, four, three, two, one, ZERO!

The rocket engine roared into life, giving Cindy for a moment, the weight she would feel back on earth. The ship leaped upward. In her rearview periscope, she could see the rugged lunar landscape slowly sinking. "Ship's away!" Turk announced and then followed with a quick rendition of "Off we go, into the wild blue yonder."

Cindy grinned and silently complimented herself on her physical endurance. Why, she wasn't uncomfortable at all. Those terrible G forces that had bothered her so much during the earth takeoff must have been figments of her imagination. Yes, she was really an old-timer now.

They hadn't traveled much of anyplace. Her instrument panel told her they were only about forty miles high and had journeyed about a hundred twenty miles in a horizontal line from takeoff point. Their speed was only about six thousand miles per hour. Good grief, at this rate, they'd never get home! The rocket fired for two minutes and at burn-out time, they were still practically creeping.

There was no point in pushing a panic button, but she could not resist asking Turk, matter-of-factly, just what in thunder he thought he was doing up there. "Don't you think you ought to release the brake or something?"

Turk chuckled into his headset. "I thought we might take the long way home. You know, through the park?"

Dr. Lufkin came to Cindy's rescue. "This is all the speed we need to escape moon's weak gravitational field. For the next ten hours we'll gradually slow down until we're going about a thousand miles per hour. Then we'll pass into earth's gravity and be pulled home at a pretty fast clip."

"Twenty-five thousand miles per hour to be exact," Turk said.

The voyage homeward had begun. Again, they were floating weightlessly through the vast void of space. Brer used to describe it as "nothingness surrounded by nothing." She would be inclined to change that to "something surrounded by something—if you went far enough." Even the silence out there had a kind of music to it: the music of the celestial spheres that no earthling could ever hear.

Enough of this dreaming. There was work to do and for this she was grateful because the time would pass more quickly. "Time for ward rounds," she called to Dr. Lufkin.

"Fine. I'll be with you in a minute."

For this critical period, working with the patients, she removed both gloves even though it was a personal hazard. She would simply have to believe that nothing would happen to the ship's pressurization system during the time she was so exposed.

Floating along, pulling herself hand over hand monkey fashion, she checked first on Dr. Zizak, removed his helmet and adjusted his position on the litter. Temperature and blood pressure, normal. She watched his face as she took his pulse. "Are you in pain?"

"A little." He bit his lip and turned his head away. He was in more than a little pain but was trying desperately to bear it.

She reached into her kit and drew out a small syringe. An injection of pain-easing medication would make him more comfortable. It was not an easy task to give the shot because she need both hands free to work. To keep herself from floating away, she strapped herself to the stanchion. The device worked perfectly.

Getting to Dr. Reed in the tier above was a simple matter and certainly did not require a ladder. Again she fastened herself securely, then helped the man remove his helmet. Temperature, pulse, blood pressure, all A-okay. "I'll bet you're getting hungry," she said, wondering how she would manage this problem.

"Matter of fact, I am. Do you suppose there's any lasagne galactic in the kitchen?"

"We'll see," she smiled. While she was at it, she might as well take Dr. Tsing's order, too.

She was thrilled to see the wonderful recovery of the great scientist. Dr. Lufkin's treatment at Luna City had saved the man long hours of pain and misery and now all he needed was a complete check-up at the hospital, followed by a good period of rest at his earthside home. "We have some chow mein back yonder," she suggested. "Do you feel up to trying some?"

Dr. Tsing laughed. "I make it a point never to try exotic dishes when traveling. My stomach does not appreciate adventuresome excursions." He belched comfortably into his gloved hand. "An algaeburger in a tube would suit me fine." He settled back on the pillow. "It is too bad that we must bother with food intake, particularly when long space explorations are involved. There is really no necessity for it, except to provide energy and growth."

Cindy stared at him, strangely intrigued, as with a forgotten melody. Then she laughed as she remembered, "I've read some of your scientific papers in the Journal. They're about as 'far out' as anything I've ever known."

He shrugged. "That is true for today. Tomorrow, I will be considered an antique in my thinking."

As the hours clicked by, Cindy found herself busier than she'd ever been in her life. Each task, that would have amounted to nothing on earth or even at Luna City, was a challenge to her abilities to "make-do" with the facilities at hand—feeding six people, one at a time, around the clock, giving medications, making ward rounds, adjusting cramped positions on the litters, physical therapy routines. . . .

She was tired, limp, and just plain sleepy but dared not let up on her routine. The most critical period of the entire trip would be coming up soon and she was determined her patients would be in the best possible physical and mental condition. They had been gone from the moon for forty-eight hours and their speed had now reached twenty-five thousand miles an hour. It wouldn't be long before they entered earth's atmosphere, where the wing temperature would reach two thousand degrees Fahrenheit. The ship's nose and wings would glow like red-hot coals as they plunged into earth's dense air blanket. Timing would have to be perfect. The descent would take ninety minutes . . . no more, no less. Dropping a decimal point in calculations would be fatal.

Dr. Lufkin put a gloved hand on her shoulder. "Cindy, you've just about got time for one more look-see before strapping down." He winked. "Turk has gotten tired of my company. Why don't you go up front?"

She sank into the seat next to Turk, aware that he was tired, and seemed depressed. The change in him puzzled and surprised her. Always before he had been so cheery and jaunty, so "devil-may-care." "Are you feeling all right?" she asked.

He looked straight ahead. "Oh, sure. Sure."

They sat in silence for a while. Finally she said, "I know your job of piloting the first woman to the moon has been difficult. I've tried not to be too bothersome . . . well, I mean I hope it hasn't been too bad."

"You've been a good trooper. I'm proud of you."

"Thanks." She sighed. "I can hardly believe it's almost over." She turned to him and frowned as an unwelcome ache of tears burned at the back of her throat. Nothing would ever be the same between her and Turk, once they'd landed. She'd go her way and he'd go his. But it was really something (she might as well admit it now to herself) to have had him looking after her as if she were the most important thing in the world. She didn't realize she was thinking aloud until she heard her own voice, "Now I know how Cinderella felt just before midnight . . ."

"That's a crazy thing to say."

"It's true, isn't it?"

Turk shook his head. "Cindy, your ball is just beginning. The hard part is almost all in the past. From the moment we land, you're going to be on the biggest merry-go-round in history. Why, you'll make the ticker tape parades of Lindbergh and Glenn look like Sunday School on a Monday night or the Officer's Club fifteen minutes after the happy hour closes."

She stared, aghast. "You don't mean it!"

"Just wait and see. Frow now on you're public property." He turned away to adjust some knobs on the panel. "You'll be a long, long time getting back to earth—after we get you there—if you follow me."

"But I don't want to be public property. I want to be . . ." She set her lips firmly, vowing she would not tell him more than he ought to know about her feelings.

"What *do* you want, Cindy?"

"I . . . I don't know. I suppose I want the things every girl wants."

Turk's mouth turned up at the corner. "Ha! I can just see you bustling around the kitchen with a little apron tied in a neat bow. Your kiddies are playing in your suburbia yard while you bake bread or some darned thing. No, Cindy," he shook his head. "You're hooked, but good. There's an old song that came out of World War I that says it very nicely: 'How you going to keep 'em down on the farm, after they've seen Paree?' That's you, Cindy. You're a space girl from now on."

"You mean I'll never be satisfied to be an earthling wife and mother?" Her lip quivered. "I'll be an old maid or something?"

He shrugged. "Could be; unless you're lucky enough to find some guy whose job it is to go into space anyway and wouldn't mind having a skirted teammate."

She looked at her gloved hands and tapped her forefinger. "Do you suppose there are many fellows around like that?"

"Oh, sure." He yawned and stretched. "Thousands probably."

"You're very encouraging," she said coolly.

"Yes, ma'am, once you start raking in all that money, selling your life story to the magazines, making movies and TV appearances . . ."

Her nostrils tightened with sudden fury. "I don't intend to keep any money for making this trip. If . . . If it ever came to that, I'd turn it over to the research foundation."

He shook his head sadly. "That's bad," he said. "Very bad. In fact it changes the entire picture."

"You're contemptible!"

"No, just thinking."

"Thinking what?" She started to struggle to her feet, but Turk held her arm.

"The competition has suddenly been narrowed down to just one person balmy enough . . ." His eyes widened with alarm. "Hey, what am I saying?"

She forced herself to laugh lightly. "Don't worry. I didn't hear a thing."

Her mind spun with confusion as she floated back to her patients. What Turk said about her being a space girl from now on was true. Then, too, the prospects of being in the world's limelight hadn't registered until he'd mentioned it.

She knew without any doubt, how she would handle that situation. But the last remark startled her. Was it really a proposal? If so, it would be one *first* that would never make the headlines because Turk would certainly change his mind once they got home.

She smiled to herself. Imagine, an earthling's first space proposal! What a story to tell one's grandchildren.

Dr. Lufkin had already given the patients their last minute checkups prior to reentry to earth's atmosphere. All that remained was the task of enclosing the men in their protective cocoons. These plastic envelopes that fitted over the full pressure suits, when activated, would fill with a dense layer of foaming plastic that would ease the brutal shock of the G forces.

Strapped down securely, the patients gave the high sign that they were ready. Dr. Lufkin returned to the control panel, and Cindy eased herself into the familiar contour couch for the final and most critical stage of the entire voyage.

Through her periscope viewer she could see the wedge shape of India jutting into the vast ocean. A few minutes later, the Indonesian archipelago spread out beneath. A glimpse of Australia and New Guinea swam into view beneath patches of clouds. Her heart thudded with excitement. Clouds! Why, they really *were* getting close to home. By now she had learned to read the radar altimeter above her couch. They were still a hundred and fifty miles high, streaking over the Pacific Ocean toward home.

But the altitude was dropping. Turk had pulled the airplane-type control wheel from the instrument board and was testing every function, every part. Again there was the jargon of the tracking stations with Turk's replies: "Moon nurse fatter, but now it doesn't matter" or, "If you knew Cindy like I know Cindy . . ." There was more truth than poetry in that last remark, too. How could she possibly be angry with someone like Turk. He was just impossibly great. . . . And what an astronaut!

She glanced at the patients. Still A-okay, as the ship streaked on around the earth, with its nose pointed downward. Again there was the bright sun, followed by darkness, and she could see the white-hot leading edges and brilliant red wings. In less than thirty minutes, she saw the sun rise again in the east.

G forces were building up again but somehow her state of mind kept her body from wracking with pain and discomfort as it had before. The exhilaration of arriving home was almost more than she could bear. Lower, lower, nearer, nearer. Their speed was subsonic as Turk dipped into the clouds. There was whiteness all around, like Christmas snow, gathering them in, pulling them toward earth.

Below the clouds, the weather was clear and sunny. The runway stretched out like a wide welcoming ribbon. Home. Home at last.

The ship halted with pinpoint precision. Everything was quiet and still inside the cabin as the magnitude of the entire experience closed in on them. In the distance, a mob of people streamed down the runway toward them. Ambulances, cars, trucks with TV cameras, speeding, zig-zagging, each determined to be the first at the scene. Turk removed his helmet. Cindy and Dr. Lufkin moved quickly to get at the patients. All of them thought the same thing at the same time; someone was liable to get hurt around here. Cindy was determined it was *not* going to be one of her patients.

## 16

The special police arrived first and formed a cordon around the ship. Slowly, carefully, the patients were offloaded and placed in the waiting ambulances. Cindy's eyes misted with gratitude and relief as she saw the med techs slam shut the doors, give her a brisk, well-done salute and head for the hospital. For them, this was just another day in careers that were too filled with unusuals to be floored by any woman-in-space routine. Standing nearby, however, was a familiar figure. She could hardly believe her eyes when the smartly uniformed med tech stepped forward. "Brer!" she said, her heart warming with pleasure at seeing her old friend. "You look great."

"Thanks, Cindy. So do you." He grinned and wiggled his ears. "I knew you'd be okay though."

"Well, that's more than I knew." She frowned with curiosity. "Say, what's the new uniform and rate?"

He shrugged and buffed his fingernails on his sleeve. "Nothing at all really. I just happen to be in charge of women-in-space briefing down here. That's all." He jerked his head in the direction of a group of girls in blue-gray dresses who were pressing against the roped off area. "My students," he explained with his new debonair diction. "At the moment, they seem quite restless."

"Honestly, Brer. You're a sight."

The ropes were lowered and the mob rushed in. Cindy headed for the ship's ladder to escape the onslaught of reporters, cameras, and autograph seekers. "Turk, do something. You've got to help me."

"Like what?" He said. "Frankly I'm gettin' outa here."

"Oh, no, you don't." She grabbed his arm. A thought occurred to her. "Look, you take the high road and I'll take the low road and I'll be at the 'O' club before you."

He shook his head as a barrage of females swooped down on him. "Never hoppen," he gasped through a face full of autograph books. Simultaneously, Cindy was caught in a crush of more people and things than she'd ever seen in her life. Oh, for the life of Luna City, where all was peaceful and simple. She peered out through a crooked elbow because a camera had pushed her arm to a strange angle. Her ears ached with waves of noise, racket, shouts . . . her eyes stung from cigar and cigarette smoke. People, people, everywhere. Thousands of them, like a moving restless sea of humanity. Would no one help her? Tight bands of nausea closed in about her stomach and throat. Perhaps it was claustrophobia, or simply having her ribs pressed so tightly she could not get her breath, but she mentally noted that moon nurse two ought never to go through this. "How was it nurse? Did you have a bad time with the looneys . . . ? Hey, are those characters crazy or something, wanting duty up there? Were you scared, or sick, or . . . just how did it feel—you know?" On and on it went until the whole place began spinning before her eyes. Fainting and fear were in the past, she'd determined. Yet, here she was again. It was just too much! Something would happen. It must.

Her heart thudded with thrills and joy as she caught sight of the Aerospace Force Band, marching up in formation. Police pushed the crowd back and now she allowed herself to climb down from her perch on the ladder. Oh dear, it was General Craig.

It was a ceremony all right, but so different from the one she'd had before takeoff. The general actually smiled as he pinned a citation on her shoulder, quite literally to her skin.

She winced, then saluted. "Sir, I have the honor to report that our Space Evac mission has been accomplished. No unusual difficulties were encountered by myself, either as a woman or as an officer with the Aerospace Force Nurse Corps."

Cameras exploded; pencils scratched as the ceremony continued.

"The patients held up nicely during the critical reentry phases. I have kept complete notes on the mission which I am sure will be of help to our future programs."

General Craig reached out to shake her hand. "For the first time in my life, I am proud to be wrong in my former statements." He smiled again, this time as though he really meant it. "There is a parade scheduled here at the Cape. Another in Washington with a visit to the White House and, of course, a ticker tape parade in New York . . ."

Cindy could contain herself no longer. "I do appreciate the honors you have bestowed upon me, but it would not be possible for such celebrations to be fully carried out unless my teammates were with me. You see, it was a team effort all the way." She glanced to one side to see Turk's crooked grin. She repeated the names, "Dr. Lufkin, Turk Hunter, Brer," through the crowd she could see her chubby roommate who had obviously been transferred to the Cape for the occasion. "Ellie! Ellie!" she shouted and waved as the band struck up the swingy old tune, *There is Nothing like a Dame* from the fabulous fifties' musical *South Pacific.*

In the midst of the bedlam, the girls hugged each other, laughing and crying at the same time. "Oh, tell me all the news. How's dad? How I wish he were here . . ."

Ellie's face stiffened. She put her hand to her mouth. "You didn't know? Oh, gosh honey, that's right. He didn't want you to be told until you got back."

"Told what?" Cindy felt a chill pass through her. "What's happened?"

Ellie put her arm around Cindy's shoulders. "Dad's had an operation on his heart. He . . . he's in the hospital."

Cindy whirled around. "Oh, General Craig, I've got to get to my dad. Can you arrange it . . . now?"

"Certainly. Your car is waiting. But," he cautioned, "remember you have a schedule to keep. Following your own physical checkup, parades, and celebrations and . . ."

"Please, General. Let it wait."

He nodded. "I understand."

Cindy braced herself as she peered around the corner into dad's hospital room. He was lying quite still with his head propped up on a pile of pillows. His stethoscope was poked into his ears and the chestpiece pressed against the carotid arteries in his neck. He was listening to his own pulse . . . and . . . he was smiling.

Cindy checked her impulse to cry for joy at seeing him. She walked in slowly, nonchalantly, as though nothing had happened to either of them. A paperback edition of *Weird Science-Fiction Tales* lay open on the bed, along with his pile of worthless Mars real estate stock. "Hi, Dad."

He raised his eyebrows and waved. "Come here, Cindy. Want to hear some sweet music?" He handed her the stethoscope. Obediently she listened to the steady even beat of a healthy heart. Tears welled in her eyes and this time she made no attempt to stop them. "Oh, Dad. This is wonderful. But why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you wait until I got back so I could have stood by?"

He adjusted his position on the bed as she plumped his pillows. "Well, you see it's like this. You know how I've always been afraid of doctors?"

She nodded. No one would touch him because he was so stubborn and ornery. All his life he'd treated his own ailments haphazardly.

"I figured if you had all that gumption to go up into space, the least I could do was to get into shape so I could go along next time."

She laughed. "Oh, Dad, you're kidding; but I love you for it."

He looked indignant. "No, I'm not kidding. I got a story right here that says people of all ages can do it—even children." He listened to his heartbeat again. "Yes, sir. They gave me a nice young heart, a total transplant. How do you like that?"

"Dad, I'm so happy I could just die."

"And what's more, I'm going to check on this Mars real estate myself. We'll see who was gullible and who was just plain shrewd." He shook his finger, "The trouble with you, Cindy, is you have no vision. You've gotten set in your ways. You've got to look ahead nowadays."

He motioned to the chair nearby. "Drag that on over now and tell me all about your trip."

The rustle of a starched uniform interrupted their visit. "Doctor says you are to sleep now, Doctor McGee."

That voice! Cindy whirled around to see a student nurse that couldn't possibly be—but was—Rosalind!

The tall brunette blushed with guilt. "Hi, Cindy. Welcome back."

"Well thanks. It's nice to be back. But you, when did you enter training? I had no idea . . ."

Rosalind, in her haughty manner, raised her eyebrows. "I'd had it in mind for a long time and decided after your trip I might as well go ahead and do it." She shook the thermometer and placed it in dad's mouth, then picked up his wrist to check the pulse count. "I understand that you are to be one of my instructors."

"Oh?"

"I will have to pass your indoctrination course." Her face became serious and for the first time, sincere. "I hope you're not still mad because of the jet ride."

"No. No, because you were absolutely right in being thorough. What I'd like to know is—how serious are you about the nursing profession? Will you use it just as a means to travel in space?"

Rosalind shook her head. "I can't answer that because I don't know."

"Well, I can answer," Dad put in. "When I first saw this student, I wouldn't have let her sweep my office floor. If there's anything I won't abide, it's a sassy nurse. But she's all right now. She's smart and she's a worker."

The clear picture began to dawn on Cindy. "Have you been taking care of Dad right along?"

Rosalind nodded. The tall brunette didn't have to say, but Cindy knew that Dad was definitely "hardship duty," a patient only the most dedicated student could handle without blowing her top.

"I've broken her in pretty well," Dad winked and then pointed to the foot of his bed. "Better straighten those corners . . . not too tight! You want to break my feet off? And see what you can do about cutting down on that vile tasting medicine. I refuse to take it one more day. And . . ."

Cindy tuned in the TV set in dad's room. "You keep it on this channel and watch your's truly. I'll be back as soon as I can."

She bent down to kiss him goodbye for the moment. "Oh, Dad, you should see it up there in space. It's so beautiful, so wonderful. Do you understand and really approve of my life's work now?"

He ran a hand through his graying-red hair, closed his eyes and nodded. "My new heart is just one of the thousands of space-age discoveries. How can I disapprove? No, Cindy, I've been a stubborn old fool, but I've changed. Now," He patted her hand, "you hurry along and get all that celebrating finished."

Turk was waiting for her as she swung around the corner to catch the elevator. He held, of all things, a necklace of flowers from the island of Hawaii. A *lei.* He placed it around her neck, then kissed her on the cheek. "Aloha, Cindy," he said huskily.

She stared at the flowers, then at his face. "But . . . but Aloha means goodbye." She bit her lip, trying to hide the terribly lost and lonely feeling. Life without Turk?

She turned away and buzzed for the elevator. "As I said a while back, it was great being with you on the trip. Thanks for everything and . . ."

His hands touched her shoulders. "Cindy, you've been so far out in space you've forgotten some of the better earth-type words. Down here, Aloha means a number of things."

She turned. "What are you trying to say?" Good grief, her fearless astronaut, her strong shoulder, her right arm was actually confused for the first time. Where was the cockiness, the teasing, the conceit? "Aloha means goodbye. So goodbye," she said without conviction.

"Aloha means hello . . . goodbye . . . and I love you."

The elevator doors clanged open, but for a moment, the waiting passengers were not quite ready to enter.

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To write this book, Eloise Engle visited strategic NASA and Air Force installations. "This fictional story," she says, "is not an empty dream. Women are serving in vital capacities in our Space Program and have passed tests given for astronauts."

FOREWORD BY DOLORES O'HARA, LIEUTENANT NURSE FOR THE MERCURY ASTRONAUTS, CAPE CANAVERAL, FLORIDA.

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